



GERARD
FAIRLIE

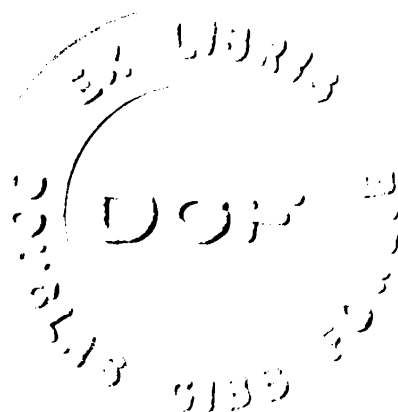
BIRDS
OF PREY



HODDER & STOUGHTON

R. J. Lowe

1953.



• 1850

1850

BIRDS OF PREY

Novels by

GERARD FAIRLIE

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The Rope which Hangs

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Unfair Lady

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The Exquisite Lady

The Man who Laughed

Scissors Cut Paper

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5



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BIRDS OF PREY
BY
GERARD FAIRLIE



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IT is my considered opinion that a crook has an infinitely more amusing and varied life than has any detective. It has always surprised me, therefore, in view of the tremendous popularity of the detective story ever since books were first published, that the chief characters in so many thrillers are much more often great detectives than great crooks. Possibly the man on the side of the Law is supposed to be more sympathetic to the vast reading public, but . . . I wonder ! I have met strange types, both in my own profession and in the ranks of the police force. In both spheres I have met a lot of good fellows, in the sense that the term "good fellow" should be used—which, I maintain, is that the person so described should be a pleasant and interesting companion—and I am being perfectly honest for once when I say that I think there are more charming crooks than there are charming detectives.

At all events, from now on I propose to make a record of my activities, because should I have the ill luck to fall into the hands of the police and be forced to spend a term of years at the expense of the public, I should like to feel that I was still earning money. The publication of these notes, therefore, in the sad possibility which I have mentioned, issued, say, serially in one of the Sunday

newspapers and then in book form, might make a pleasant little sum for me during my enforced idleness. Who knows, there might even be film rights !

I must first make it clear that I am already a practised hand. I have passed through my period of apprenticeship and I may claim to be an expert at my job ; so much so indeed that I am the leader of a little group, the existence of which is not suspected, but whose activities are already causing Scotland Yard a certain uneasiness. I submit that I could scarcely be the recognised head of this band unless I were capable ; to be the leader of such a company requires far more ability, knowledge and expertness than is essential in order to rise from the uniformed branch to the illustrious position of Detective Inspector. I trust that in these pages I will be able to prove this fact beyond question.

No doubt I shall have to refer to those people who have entrusted their liberty to my care ; this I shall do by means of numerals, which are nice and vague. There are five of us. By virtue of my leadership I shall call myself One. A short description of how we are organised is, I think, necessary before I begin my narrative proper ; this I shall make as brief as possible.

Myself, Two and Three are the active members, if I may so define us. We are the people who get things done. Four and Five might be described as our eyes and ears. They are the people who find out what there is to be done, but they never enter into the actual accomplishment of our little undertakings. Although these two, therefore, do not risk

their liberty with us, in point of fact I am not at all sure that theirs is not the more dangerous work. The reason for this statement I can show best in actual narrative.

It was a bright spring morning when Four came to me and gave me a hint that something might be doing fairly soon. I was glad. We had been going through a period of inaction, chiefly due to the fact that others in our profession had been idle. It is seldom, you see, that we ourselves bother to find out the chances offered by honest, but stupid, citizens ; we wait for others to do this work, and then step in. It is very much more profitable and less risky, for this reason : we step in at the last possible moment, when those men of inferior intelligence who are the common run of crooks have practically achieved their intentions. Should anything go wrong, therefore, it is more than likely that the men who start the whole show, the men who are preying upon the honest citizens—and upon whom we are preying—are the people who will get into trouble with the police. We are like shadows waiting for the preliminary work to be done, upon the completion of which we step in to reap the reward.

Four, as I say, came to me. I was glad to see him. I had not seen him for some time, and in the interval, on my directions, he had become attached to the McGrory gang. McGrory comes from Glasgow : where he came from before that, God only knows. He is a nasty customer and I shouldn't be surprised if some Polish couple had been responsible for him originally. McGrory, cer-

tainly, was not his name, but it was the one he went by, and personally I always call a man by the label he chooses to affix to himself. McGrory is not in the highest flight amongst us, not by any means, but he gives a good deal of trouble to Scotland Yard all the same. He has some clever men under him who follow him, chiefly because they dare not do otherwise, having once fallen into his clutches. He is a bully of the worst type, and in view of all this I was glad to see Four, looking not only safe and sound, but also flourishing in health.

"Sit down, Four," I said. "Drink? Cigarette?"

My questions were a mere formality: Four both smokes and drinks—but not to excess. Over-smoking hits the nerves, over-drinking hits the intellect, and every man who works for me must be both physically and mentally fit. That is a fast rule. I neither smoke nor drink.

Once Four was comfortable he smiled at me.

"Well, chief," he remarked, "I don't like this McGrory fellow. I shan't be sorry when you can give me orders to clear out from that lot."

I smiled.

"That rather depends on McGrory," I replied, "but you will get out from that lot just as soon as I can let you, don't you worry. What do you call yourself with them?"

Four laughed uproariously.

"I don't call myself anything," he said, partially recovered. "The moment I fell in with them they gave me a name. They are a pretty rough lot and I think the reason why I was taken

into their confidence was partly because they wanted somebody who looked—well, reasonable. Anyway, first thing they did was to call me ‘the Dude,’ and ‘the Dude’ I still am.”

“Why not?” I murmured to myself, casting an appraising glance at his clothes.

“And why have you come to see me?” I asked aloud.

Four took a moment or two to reply, then replacing his glass on the table beside him, he leant forward.

“Chief, McGrory’s on rather a big thing, I think.”

“How big?” I asked.

“About two thousand.”

“Sterling?”

“Yes.” Four smiled. “McGrory won’t touch stuff that’s got to be melted down or disposed of in that sort of way. He’s out for the ready all the time. This two thousand is in cash.”

He paused, and I watched him. Two thousand is not very much, but . . . well two thousand is two thousand, anyway. If it could be picked up easily I saw no reason for not interfering on our behalf.

“Tell the tale,” I said, quietly.

“There’s a man,” began Four, “who lives at the Metropole in Brighton. I don’t know whether you know it, but until recently McGrory had a girl attached to his gang——”

“Very dark hair,” I smiled. “Rather wonderful eyes, very big and very dark. Oval face, rather spoilt by a slightly too pronounced chin.

Used to be in the chorus of several London revues."

Four looked at me.

"Yes," he said, "I should have remembered you knew everything."

The compliment pleased me. Four is not free with flattery.

"Well, a few weeks ago this girl quarrelled violently with McGrory—and left the gang. McGrory was furious and swore to be even with her, but she seemed to have no fear of him. Anyway he kept himself well informed as to her movements and found she was making a dead set at a young city man living at the Metropole. He's a bit of a gay dog, you know. McGrory has found out that she's getting him pretty well involved."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Blackmail?" I asked.

"Well—more or less," said Four quickly, knowing that I dislike that form of enrichment. "But you see it's not the straightforward stuff that you'd think. This girl is going to compromise the lad pretty badly and then tell him that he can buy himself out of his trouble for a couple of thousand. He banks in London, goes up to his business every day, and the girl has only to mention a date upon which she will require the money—in cash. Got it yet?"

I had an idea, but I thought I would hear a little more.

"McGrory has an informant who will tell him the day. He knows the train, anyway. There's the Merstham tunnel just waiting for a job of that sort. When this young fellow is on his way

with the money he . . . well, he loses it in the Merstham tunnel."

"I see," I said slowly.

The idea of interfering was attractive; it promised to be so very easy.

"Tell me," I said, "this Merstham tunnel——"

"One mile," said Four, quickly anticipating my question. "About two minutes to get through. That will give McGrory plenty of time."

"Yes," I said musingly. "Plenty of time for both of us, I think, don't you?"

Four grinned.

"Want to know anything else, chief?"

"I shall want to know," I said, very distinctly, "the date of the proposed transaction and the time of the train."

"I can tell you the time of the train now," said Four. "He travels down every night on the 5.35."

"Thank you," I said quietly, "and can you give me any idea of the earliest date?"

"McGrory's informant seems to think that the girl will get the man where she wants him in about three days."

"I see. Anything else, Four?"

"Nothing for the moment," he said, "but you won't forget, chief, that I'd like a change of atmosphere and companions as soon as you can manage it?"

"I shall not forget," I said, "and thank you, Four. Two thousand is not very much but a little pocket money is useful. Yes, Four, the more I think of it, thank you."

I didn't offer him another drink. He looked at

the decanter but didn't ask for one. He knows my views. Before he left he had instructions to supply me with full details of how the proposed robbery was to take place, as soon as McGrory had made his arrangements.

After he had left me I looked at my watch, feeling that a little Brighton air would do me the world of good.

"Let me see," I said to myself, "the 5.35 is an excellent train and the Brighton Hippodrome always has an excellent entertainment. The Metropole Hotel is very comfortable."

I made up my mind. On my way out for lunch I passed a telegraph office and sent a wire reserving for myself a room at the hotel. That evening found me at Brighton.

I was back in London for lunch on the following day. The Merstham tunnel had taken me two minutes on the way down and just under three minutes on the way up. Provided the evening was not foggy, therefore, the evening of the chosen day, I could rely on something between the two being correct. During the course of that afternoon I got hold of Two and Three and told them to be in readiness. I could say no more at the moment until I heard from Four the nature of McGrory's plan. It came that evening. Four did not turn up in person but a detailed statement arrived through a channel that is quite safe. I read McGrory's plan over carefully and, I must confess, was surprised at its neatness; I did not think McGrory had the brain to do it. I spent that evening working out my own arrangements.

The following day I acquainted Two and Three with my plan and instructed Two, who was to play the chief character, to proceed to Brighton without delay, study the gentleman concerned and then purchase what he might require. To this end I supplied him with a sum of money.

Personally I lunched at Claridge's as a sort of anticipatory celebration. Two thousand, after all, is two thousand. The following morning Two reported to me that he was quite prepared and I let Four know that all was now in readiness. I was waiting only for a word from Four to inform me that McGrory proposed to make his attempt on a certain day.

The information came rather sooner than I expected; the attempt was to be made in two days' time. I booked my seat in the Pullman carriage which I knew to be usually favoured by McGrory's victim, and waited as patiently as I could for the time to come.

The evening arrived. I was in plenty of time for the train and was glad to notice that McGrory's intended victim had taken his usual place some five minutes before the train started. The evening was fine and clear; there would be no delay, therefore, in the tunnel and I was intrigued to see what effect this would have on McGrory's plan, as he had not allowed himself any too much time. I looked around at the other passengers in the Pullman carriage, and recognised easily enough some of McGrory's men. Him I did not see; possibly, afraid to excite suspicion, he was in some other part of the train. Others of the passengers

I also recognised and I could not restrain a small smile of satisfaction ; my plan was working nicely anyway.

We reached the tunnel in just about the time I had allowed and slowed down to enter it. We had not been more than half a minute or so on our way when the train suddenly stopped with a grinding of brakes, and the lights in the Pullman went out.

" Oh ! " said I to myself, " so McGrory got hold of the driver all right, did he ? Perhaps that's where he is at the moment."

I did not hesitate, but making for the door in the darkness, opened it and slid out on to the metals of the up line, noticing as I did so that the lights of the two Pullman carriages on either side of the one that I had just left had also been extinguished. I laughed to myself.

" McGrory's taking no chances ! "

Then I very quickly took from my small bag a black silk cloak and hood which I slipped over my head, arranging slits cut for my eyes, so that I could see. A mask would not have been sufficient ; I wanted to make quite sure that in the prevailing darkness, should the lights suddenly flash out again, I should stand a very good chance of remaining unobserved.

The lights did flash out again but not until about a minute had elapsed. I smiled to myself as I cowered against the wall of the tunnel. This was not in accordance with McGrory's plan, but it was definitely in accordance with mine. I watched through the windows the state of confusion within

the Pullman. McGrory's men were crowding around the seat which had been occupied by his intended victim, but they were not allowed to continue with their work. The sudden illumination had evidently surprised them ; I caught the astonished expression on the face of the man nearest me and then I saw the other men act. It was done neatly and swiftly ; trust Scotland Yard for that. There was a short fight but it lasted even less long than I had expected it would ; McGrory's men were quickly overpowered and handcuffed by those other stubborn and silent fellows whom I had noticed in the carriage, members of Scotland Yard's plain-clothes branch. So the Commissioner had received my warning all right.

I knew that Two and Three must now have almost completed their work if my plan were to be successful, and trusting to my black hood and cloak in order to escape detection, I moved quickly to the door, which I had left open. Just as I reached it, a figure, expostulating wildly but uselessly because of the hub-bub in the carriage, was thrust down the steps almost into my arms. I quickly seized the man and pulled him to the wall of the tunnel. As I did so I saw the exact counterpart of McGrory's intended victim in deep converse with the Inspector in charge of the Scotland Yard men. Good old Two ! Even as I noted this the train suddenly started off again. McGrory, probably by now in the engine carriage with the muzzle of an automatic pressed into the ribs of the driver, must have given word for the train to be re-started ; yes, just about the one

minute for which he had allowed in his plans had now elapsed.

I turned to the figure beside me, which was being held firmly in the muscular arms of Three and quite incapable of movement.

"I believe your name is Thompson," I said. "Good evening, Mr. Thompson. I have to inform you that I wish you no harm provided that you do precisely what you are told at once. You will walk up the tunnel, a distance of about three-quarters of a mile, until you reach the open country. You may then do as you like, and don't worry, I have taken pains to discover that there are no trains either coming or going which will disturb you during your little walk, provided that you do not dally on the way. Good evening!"

Three released his hold and the man shot off as fast as his legs would allow him. I could not restrain a laugh.

"Come on," I said to Three, "the sooner we are out of it the better."

We made our way back towards the opening of the tunnel, a short distance away, and as we did so I removed my cloak and hood. The train runs by a road, whereon a car was awaiting us, driven by Five.

Not long afterwards the three of us were back in my flat. I gave them both dinner; they deserved it, although the whole performance had been ridiculously easy.

At about half-past nine there came a ring at the door. Three opened it and admitted my friend Two, now once more in his ordinary clothes. He

came in and without a word placed Bank of England notes to the value of two thousand pounds on my desk.

"Thank you," I said, quietly. "You, Two, will receive the usual five per cent. extra for the most hazardous task in the undertaking, and may I congratulate you. Your make-up was superb."

Two grinned.

"I took some trouble," he said.

"No doubt," I said sharply. "It pays to take trouble when you work for me."

These little reminders, I think, even in the case of men who are devoted followers and experts at their jobs, certainly helps to maintain good discipline.

I gave my men a drink and dismissed them until I should have further use for them. Five, before he left, was instructed to inform Four that his connection with those who were left of McGrory's gang—if any—need not be retained.

SUPERINTENDENT TUDOR sat at his desk in New Scotland Yard and looked up at his subordinate who had just entered the room.

"Well, Lynton?"

"McGrory and four of his gang safe in the cells at Brighton, sir."

"Good! The information given us was correct then?"

"Quite correct, sir. As soon as I got to Victoria Station and had a look at the people who were travelling in that Pullman I knew that the attempt was to take place. All the old faces were there, sir."

He smiled.

"Yes," said Tudor, quickly interrupting his subordinate's threatened word picture of his activities. Tudor wanted to go home; he had waited some considerable time for the return of the Inspector with his information. "Let's have the facts, please."

Lynton smiled to himself; he guessed at the thought which was behind his superior's curtness.

"I and six men boarded the train, sir. We travelled as ordinary passengers but in the same Pullman as Mr. Thompson and the McGrory lot. McGrory himself was in the first

carriage after the engine. Two men were told off to look after him. Nothing happened until we got to the Merstham tunnel, sir. We hadn't gone a quarter of a mile in the tunnel when the train stopped and the lights went out, just as our information told us that they would, sir. The attempt was made in the darkness, but owing to my counter measures the lights were on again in something under a minute. Mr. Thompson was manhandled a bit but uninjured. The money was found on McGrory's second-in-command and I returned it to Mr. Thompson. Here's his receipt, sir."

Lynton laid a piece of paper on his superior's desk.

"In the meantime the train went off again and I don't think any passengers, other than those in the Pullman carriage concerned, realised that anything out of the ordinary had happened. At all events we had no difficulty. McGrory was taken in the back of the engine where he was holding up the driver at the point of a loaded automatic."

"Loaded?" asked Tudor, quickly.

"Yes, sir."

"Good," said Tudor, a quiet smile coming over his face. "I am glad we've got that fellow in possession of firearms. He'll get another year or two on top of an ordinary sentence for that."

Lynton smiled.

"Yes, sir."

He knew well that Tudor was pleased at

the result of the evening's work. McGrory had been a thorn in the side of Scotland Yard for some time, but had hitherto avoided capture.

"He'll go up on a charge of attempted robbery to-morrow, sir. I shall be required as a witness. There's no trouble about the conviction, sir. A perfectly clear case. If I may say so, sir, a good evening's work."

"A good evening's work," reiterated Tudor. "Thank you, Lynton. I am obliged to you. Those five men out of the way and in particular McGrory himself, pleases me very much. You will apply for an adjournment, of course, in order to give us time to collect some other charges to prefer against the man. Yes," he said, leaning back in his chair musingly, a twinkle in his eye. "I am afraid, Mr. McGrory, that you won't be able to annoy me again for some considerable time. I must say I am obliged to old Vickers."

Lynton, realising that his superior was relenting from his curt attitude, the result, no doubt, of the pleasant information which he had just received, dared to make a remark not strictly relative.

"Excuse me, sir, but Vickers is a useful old man. So useful that I sometimes wonder how long he will last."

Tudor looked up, surprised.

"How long he will last?"

"Well, sir, these informers don't usually go on for very long, do they?"

"Oh," said Tudor, "I see what you mean,

but he's a cunning old rascal, is Vickers. I don't think he'll come to much harm."

"No, sir," Lynton allowed the note in his voice to show that he was not convinced. "All the same, sir, Vickers has been giving us some very useful information for upwards of two years. I am afraid that some old lag coming out after a long sentence will remember Vickers, will suspect that that was the way he was nabbed. I shouldn't care to be in Vickers' shoes then. I shouldn't, as a matter of fact, very much care to be Mr. Vickers when McGrory gets loose."

Tudor laughed merrily.

"That won't be for some time yet, Lynton." He smiled. "And Vickers is an old man. *Tempus fugit*, you know. Vickers may be no longer with us after the period of years which I, personally, am going to see that McGrory gets for his recent escapades."

"I see, sir," Lynton smiled.

Suddenly Tudor looked up.

"By the way," he said, "what about the girl?"

Lynton's face clouded.

"I'm sorry, sir. She wasn't on the train, of course. She was supposed to be down at Brighton waiting for Mr. Thompson to meet her with the notes. Well, Inspector Birch kept the appointment for Mr. Thompson. He was very agreeable to that. Unfortunately she was not there. I don't know what happened. I sent a man round at once to her lodgings but

she had left early that morning and they hadn't the slightest idea where she was going."

"Did you leave a man to keep watch?" asked Tudor.

"Yes, sir, but it isn't any good unless the whole thing was a blind and the lodging-house people were in it. She packed her traps, took her luggage away with her."

"I see," said Tudor, thoughtfully. Then suddenly he looked up and smiled. "Well it doesn't very much matter. We will probably pick her up somewhere. Anyway McGrory and his lot are away."

"Yes, sir."

Rather relieved, for he had feared that this failure might interfere with Tudor's approbation of his little effort that evening, Lynton smiled broadly. Determined to steer the conversation back towards events which had undoubtedly been completely successful, Lynton risked a remark.

"Excuse me, sir, but that clears up McGrory's little lot, doesn't it?"

"How many did you say you'd got?"

"Five, including McGrory."

"Five, including McGrory. Let me see. Yes, that's right. That's a clean sweep, with the exception of the new addition, and I don't suppose he matters much. He hasn't been with McGrory long enough to learn his methods."

"The new addition, sir?" Lynton's tone was questioning.

"Yes. From news I have had McGrory had recently co-opted a new member for his little gang. Don't know where he came from originally. I suppose before that he worked as a free lance and was attracted by McGrory's glamour in the underworld. Curious fellow. From what I hear he was rather out of place with that rough lot. Much more of the confidence man, I should say, from the description given to me. Smart clothes and all the rest of it. I shouldn't have thought he would have suited McGrory at all. I understand that his companions called him 'the Dude.' By the way, I suppose that fellow wasn't among the men you got and it isn't one of the old hands who's still at large?"

"No, sir," said Lynton, firmly, "I am quite definite about that. They're all old hands whom I've got. No sign of a new man, a Dude in good clothes or anything of that sort."

"Hum!" said Tudor quietly. "I wonder what that means? Well, we shall know soon enough. Get his description, Lynton. They've got it in the office, and keep your eyes open for the girl and this Dude. They'll probably have to come together after this—well, from their point of view, catastrophe, I suppose—and that may be your chance to get them both and clean up the whole show."

"Yes, sir," said Lynton.

"Right. Well, I don't think there's anything more. Are you going down to Brighton again to-night?"

"No, sir, first thing in the morning, I thought."

"Whichever you like," said Tudor, pleasantly. "I am very pleased with you, Lynton. This is a good show."

"Thank you, sir."

Detective Inspector Lynton was about to turn and leave the room when the telephone on Tudor's desk suddenly rang. There was something rather imperative about the note of the bell and for a moment Tudor stared at the instrument in silence. Then he motioned to Lynton to wait and lifted the receiver to his ear. It was unusual for a call to come through for Tudor at that time. True, they knew he was in the office, but he wanted to get away as soon as possible and had been only waiting for Lynton. Still, now that he was there he might as well hear what they had to say.

"Hullo ! "

"Call through from Brighton, sir."

"From Brighton ? "

"Yes, sir. Will you take it ? "

"All right," said Tudor, sharply.

He looked up questioningly at Lynton. Lynton had caught the name of the town and had taken an involuntary step nearer to the desk. Tudor motioned him to a chair.

"Hullo ! Yes."

A voice came over the wire.

"Is that Superintendent Tudor ? "

"It is."

"Good evening, sir. Is Inspector Lynton with you?"

"He is."

"He has given you his report, sir?"

"He has."

"I am afraid it is not quite correct, sir."

"Eh? What are you saying?"

In sudden excitement, with a foreboding that he was about to hear unpleasant news, Tudor leant forward so that his mouth was only an inch or so from the mouthpiece of the instrument.

"I am afraid his report is not quite accurate, sir," came the cool voice from the other end.

"Mr. Thompson has just arrived here, sir, in rather a bad state of repair."

"Bad state of repair?" said Tudor, quickly.

"Yes, sir, mentally and physically. Mr. Thompson has arrived in a car and reported that when the lights went out in the Pullman he was hustled out of the train and was held up by a man whom he says he cannot identify, and another person completely clothed in a black silk cloak and hood, which made identification impossible. As soon as the train had moved off he was informed that he could be of no further use to this hooded person and sent off along the tunnel to find his own way home. He is here . . . er, he has just arrived, sir."

"Just one minute," said Tudor, "I don't understand you. Lynton has just told me—in fact I have a receipt here on my table signed

by Thompson—Lynton has just told me that he handed the two thousand back to Thompson himself on the train to Brighton, and that Thompson left Lynton only at Brighton Station.”

“Yes, sir, that’s what we all thought, sir. But I am afraid the man who signed that receipt, that receipt which you have got now, sir, was not the authentic Thompson.”

“What?” Tudor’s voice rose almost to a shout.

“I am afraid, sir,” came the calm voice, very deliberately over the wire, “that Inspector Lynton was fooled. There can be no question at all that I have the real Mr. Thompson here in my office at the moment. Lynton handed back Mr. Thompson’s two thousand pounds to somebody on the train made up to look like Mr. Thompson.”

The receiver fell from Tudor’s nerveless fingers.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR LYNTON left the precincts of Scotland Yard in a distinctly chastened frame of mind. He had entered that evening rather pleased with himself, pleased at the ease with which he had accomplished his first important mission, but the news from Brighton received by Superintendent Tudor scarcely half an hour before, had changed this pleasant feeling into one of acute dismay. To be fooled at all was bad enough, but to be fooled in that ridiculously easy manner was almost as bad as it could be. The Superintendent had taken care to point this out; he had not minced his words. He had told Lynton precisely what he thought of him, and making some allowance for Tudor's natural irritation in the circumstances, still Lynton could not deny that most of the bitter things which his superior had said to him were well deserved. On the other hand it was certainly a little hard; the best plans, so Lynton told himself, were those which were the most simple, and undoubtedly the very simplicity of the whole thing had completely baffled him. He realised also that he had been in the presence of a great artist, for even the Inspector at Brighton, who had met

the train, had acknowledged over the wire that the likeness and make-up of the impostor had been amazing. But the facts had to be faced. Some person unknown had walked off with two thousand pounds which were not his own property, and the knowledge of the inner workings both of Scotland Yard and the underworld, which the successful achievement of this feat necessitated, boded ill for the future peace of police officials and of criminals themselves.

What sort of a man was it who knew McGrory's intentions? What sort of a man was it who knew that Scotland Yard were acquainted with McGrory's intentions, and above all, who was acquainted with the counter measures that Scotland Yard proposed to take? A master criminal surely. One of those arch-devils who appear occasionally in the world of crime, once perhaps in a period of years, and while they are still at liberty perform feats of unparalleled daring and skill. Lynton appreciated that in the demonstration which he had witnessed both daring and skill had been present, that the man had somehow or other removed the authentic Mr. Thompson from the train and had taken his place fully made-up, in a period of time of under one minute—a very remarkable performance.

But Lynton had no time to waste on retrospective thought. The parting words of Superintendent Tudor were still in his ears; angry words yet Lynton's sense of fairness

made him admit that they were well merited. He knew that in one sense he was lucky: Superintendent Tudor had given him a second chance, which was not a habit of his. A bad failure usually meant that a man was put on the shelf. Possibly Tudor had taken into consideration Lynton's previous good service, possibly he realised how very expertly the Inspector had been fooled and may have been a little sorry for the younger man.

"You are going to get a second chance, and you are darned lucky, see! You've got to go out and get that man who fooled you. Don't rest until you do. What's more you've got to get him just as soon as it's humanly possible. If you don't—well, you will leave the special branch."

There had been no answer possible. Lynton had left the Superintendent's room and now he was making his way to a little shop in Whitechapel where he proposed to start his activities. There was no time to be lost; Lynton had decided to start at once. As he approached the district he took care to avoid recognition by the passers-by. His face was well enough known in Whitechapel, and he had no desire to cause Vickers any trouble by letting it be known that Inspector Lynton had visited the receiver and informer so late at night, but clouds had obscured the stars and the night was dark. Taking advantage of the shadows Lynton made rapid progress and finally reached Vickers' house. He knocked

gently and waited. The door was opened only an inch or two and he felt that he was being subjected to a keen scrutiny.

"Evening, Vickers," he said jovially.

The door was quickly opened and Lynton slipped through. No word was spoken until the old man had closed it and securely bolted it behind him. He led the way to his little parlour and lit an oil lamp, and then looked at the young man.

"Well, Inspector, and what can I do for you?"

Not for the first time Lynton examined his host carefully. There was something peculiarly attractive, although rather awesome, about this old man. Large bushy eyebrows seemed to be the chief feature of his face and practically obscured the steely, grey eyes. The skin was very deeply lined; Lynton caught himself wondering how old this man could be who had been known to Scotland Yard as an informer for over two years, but although he gave the appearance of great age Lynton suspected that Vickers was not so old as he seemed to be. His movements were lithe and active, remarkably so for a man with hair so grey that it was almost white, with so pronounced a stoop and such frail hands in which the veins stood out all knotted and gnarled. But it was to those bushy eyebrows that Lynton's gaze reverted. They were Vickers' most distinctive feature and undoubtedly his best safeguard, for a lot may be told from a man's

eyes ; nature had shielded Vickers from this danger.

"And what may I do for you, Inspector Lynton ?" The sound of the old man's voice brought Lynton back with a jerk to reality.

"I hope quite a lot, Vickers," he said, quietly. "I want to know how you got that story of McGrory's little effort."

Vickers' face did not change one jot in expression. He remained silent, looking fixedly at the Inspector ; for a long moment he remained quite still, then suddenly he spoke :

"How long have you been at Scotland Yard, Inspector ?"

Lynton looked at him in surprise.

"A few months," he said.

"Yes. A few months." Vickers' voice was low, almost reminiscent. "The men who usually come to see me have been there a few years. Allow me to give you a word of advice, Inspector. It is not usual for me to be asked, provided that the information I give is accurate, how I came by it. I have never, in fact, been asked that before."

Lynton looked down uneasily, partly because he did not like being corrected on procedure by this old informer, and partly because he could no longer meet the steady stare of what could be seen of those fierce grey eyes shining from under the shaggy eyebrows.

"It may not be usual," he said sharply, "for you to be asked for the source of your

information, Vickers. I dare say it isn't. As you infer, you may know best, but I'd like to remind you that I've asked the question and should like an answer."

Suddenly Vickers smiled. The action completely changed his face; he seemed to become instantaneously a benevolent old gentleman. Lynton, who had looked up again at his host on pronouncing his last words, could quite imagine seeing him with a little black skull cap on his head, red slippers peeping from under a rug and a churchwarden's pipe sticking from the corner of his mouth; but he quickly brushed this fancy aside.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I am asking you, Vickers, and I want an answer."

"Why?" asked the informer suddenly, without changing his smiling expression. "Has something gone wrong?"

"You are asking me for information now," said Lynton. "That is not in the right order: I asked you first. I want to know where you got your information about McGrory."

For a long moment there was silence, then without answering him the informer moved over to a desk which stood in the corner, and took from it a copy of the final edition of an evening paper. He looked at the Stop Press column and then turned to Lynton.

"Oh, I see why you were asking me this question, Inspector. McGrory and four men were taken, so this paper says. That's accurate, isn't it?"

"Yes," snapped Lynton.

"You are after the fifth man?"

The Inspector looked at Vickers in astonishment. There was little indeed that the old informer did not know about the underworld.

"I want him. Yes," he said slowly; as a reason it would do as well as any other for Vickers.

The old man suddenly replaced his paper and shuffled over to a chair near the table. He sat down and looked at the young Inspector.

"It would be a pity," he said slowly, evidently choosing his words with care, "it would be a pity, Inspector, if old Vickers were arrested for some silly little thing and put in prison for a time. It could be done . . . Scotland Yard knows that it could be done . . . you, yourself, Inspector, probably know more than anybody else how very easy it would be. And yet . . . it isn't done. And why? Because, Inspector, because the officials of Scotland Yard know that it would be a pity, a great pity, if they were no longer to be supplied with the information . . . the accurate information, that old Vickers is able to give them. To a large extent, Inspector, my safety lies in the fact that I am able to go on supplying this information. Where and from whom I get it is my own affair. Were I to tell you, and were you to make enquiries . . . to trace my source of information . . . well, then, the person or people from whom I obtain

it would immediately suspect that I had been talking, which would mean that besides putting me into great danger, I would never be able to get information from that source again." He paused, and then spoke curtly: "I think it would be better, Inspector Lynton, if you could take back that question. Don't you?"

The plain logic of the old man's words struck Lynton like a blow between the eyes. He had not considered it that way before, but the fact remained that Vickers was probably in possession of information which would be very useful to him, in order to enable him to retrieve his position in the eyes of Superintendent Tudor. He looked at Vickers sharply.

"I am not going to trace, as you call it, your source of information. At least I don't think so, but I want to know it, Vickers. There's a good reason or I wouldn't ask."

"You are persisting?" said Vickers.

"Yes, I am persisting. I want a plain answer to a plain question. What was your source of information with regard to McGrory and his gang?"

Vickers lowered his eyes and looked into the empty fireplace for a few moments, then he looked up once more at the young Inspector.

"I wish you wouldn't persist," he said, shaking himself rather as though he desired to get rid of something unpleasant. "It is silly to persist. I think it is the folly of youth."

"Cut it out," said Lynton sharply, controlling his anger as best he could.

"I wish you wouldn't persist," repeated old Vickers. "I should hate to be rude to a police officer."

"Well, don't," said Lynton. "Just answer my question."

"You want to know the source of my information," said Vickers quietly. "Does Scotland Yard know that you have come here to ask me that, Inspector?"

"Look here," said Lynton furiously. "I've had enough of this. Are you or are you not going to answer me?"

Without a word the old man got to his feet, shuffled across the room and held the door open, beckoning to Lynton as he did so. Rather mystified, the Inspector followed him. Vickers walked along the passage and unbolted his door; he opened it and stood aside.

"Does this mean," said Lynton, fuming, "that you refuse to answer? No, just wait a minute, Vickers. I want to warn you that if you are going to get high-hatted with me you may find it . . . difficult to carry on. Now, a plain answer. Are you going to tell me the source of your information with regard to McGrory?"

"No," said Vickers shortly.

Lynton looked at him, and with an expressive shrug of his shoulders passed out into the night. The old man carefully shut his door, shot the bolts once more into place, and re-

turned to his own room. Then, with a vicious glance out of the window into the blackness which had swallowed up the young Inspector, he muttered the one word: "Pig!"

ON the same evening and at about the same time at which old man Vickers so pithily pronounced his opinion of young Inspector Lynton, a man made his way quickly along a dark side street of Maida Vale. He was wearing a light overcoat, the collar of which he kept turned up, and his soft hat slouched over his eyes. As far as was possible he took advantage of the shadows of the street, but did not allow an obvious desire to pass unnoticed to interfere with the speed at which he was travelling. He stopped at last in front of one of the houses and rang a bell. Almost at once the door was opened to him and he slipped inside. Once the door was shut behind him he took off his hat, allowing his good-looking, if somewhat thin, features to be seen.

"Miss Desmond in?" he asked, cheerfully.

The old woman who had opened the door to him, obviously a lodging-house keeper, nodded towards the stairs.

"Usual room," she said, "waiting for you."

Mother Hudson was very taciturn, a characteristic which commended her lodgings to certain of those who frequented them.

The young man ran up the stairs and on reaching the first landing knocked at a door

opposite. A voice called to him to enter, and he passed into the room quickly.

A young girl had risen at his knock and now came towards him, an expression of mingled anxiety and relief on her dainty features. Her face, although now white and drawn, was very beautiful; oval in shape, with an aquiline nose, wide mouth, rather too pronounced a chin and naturally wavy black hair cut short. Her eyes were dark and haunting and seemed to lend an air of unique distinction to the whole countenance. There was about her an indescribable stamp of independence and freedom; here was obviously one who would refuse to allow herself to be hampered by any laws of convention, yet this appearance of daring was tempered with both pride and sincerity, so that there was about the girl an attractiveness which invited trust.

As the young man entered she hastened up to him, staring at him with questioning eyes.

"Well, Ben," she cried anxiously. "What's happened? I've spent the most miserable evening of my life sitting here, afraid to go out in case I should miss you, afraid to buy a paper, just sitting here watching the clock, jumping at every sound, and wishing, wishing to God that I was out of the whole thing."

Her voice sounded hysterical, as though at any moment she might give way to a flood of tears, and Sherwood quickly sought to calm her fears.

"Silly girl," he cried jovially, "everything went off splendidly. Nothing at all to be afraid of, or worry about. I've got the lad's little lot here quite safe."

He withdrew from an inner pocket a massive pocket-book, crammed to overflowing with banknotes. He fondled it lovingly, the girl watching him with bated breath in a sort of horrified fascination, and then returned it to his pocket, murmuring gently:

"Two thousand of the best, my dear."

"Tell me," she cried, her voice rather hoarse and strained, "tell me all about it. What really happened? Was . . . was Thompson . . . hurt?"

"Hurt? Not in the least," cried Sherwood, cheerfully. "Everything went off according to programme. When I got on the train at Victoria I saw your charming young man sitting in his usual place, blissfully unaware that all the remaining seats in the carriage were occupied by McGrory's little villains and our lot, not to mention certain prominent members of Scotland Yard's most brainy corps—and this bright lad!"

He pointed gaily at himself and burst into strident laughter, but the girl, without removing her eyes from his face for one moment or joining in his noisy mirth, waited until he was more composed, and then said shortly:

"Well? Tell me what happened?"

"Don't be impatient, Estelle, my dear, I'm telling you as quickly as I can. As soon as

we reached East Croydon I gently withdrew into the next Pullman carriage and thence into the corridor. No one was about, and in a few moments his own mother wouldn't have been able to guess which was Mr. Thompson of the Metropole, Brighton, and which was—myself, little Ben Sherwood, erstwhile juvenile lead and incidentally, leading light of the 'Happy Fellows' touring company, well known for his brilliant impersonations in——"

"Oh, never mind all that," cried Estelle, impatiently, "do get on with the story. Can't you see I'm nearly mad with anxiety? You disguised yourself as Thompson. What then?"

"After that I took a seat in the Pullman carriage next to that wherein my double was so peacefully seated, devouring the *Evening News* in search of sensation—and by gosh! he got it too! I hid behind the *News* and as soon as we had passed Coulsdon, waited cheerfully for developments. They came soon enough. A few seconds after we had entered the tunnel—Merstham, you know—the lights were all switched off and the train came to a standstill. This was my cue. I dashed into the next Pullman and into Thompson's seat, from which that startled gentleman had been somewhat forcibly ejected by another stalwart member of our little band. There was considerable excitement in our part of the world for a few seconds, perfect pandemonium in fact, but quite soon, much too soon for the

success of McGrory's little plan, the lights went up again and the train moved off once more. You should have seen the expressions on the faces of McGrory's lot. They had reckoned on at least double as long in order to make their get-away, and when they found themselves being carefully manacled by the afore-mentioned Scotland Yardites, well their language positively made me blush . . . with envy. At last, order having been once more restored, a most charming individual, one surnamed Lynton of Scotland Yard, an incredibly philanthropic and charitable youth, insisted upon my taking possession of the two thousand beauties you have just glimpsed, requesting merely that I make out a receipt for same on poor Mr. Thompson's behalf, which I most cheerfully did. We chatted amicably for the remainder of the journey, exchanging views which were astonishingly similar, as to the daring and extraordinary ingenuity manifested by highway robbers of the present day, also as to the very detestable methods of blackmailing maidens—" Sherwood spoke the last words very slowly and significantly, casting a sly glance at Estelle, who had started and now shrank back as though from a blow—"until we arrived at Brighton Station. Here we were met by another equally delightful upholder of the law. He enquired as to where I had arranged to meet you—I told him the Aquarium he thereupon offered to keep the appointment for me, to which I was more than agreeable,

and for all I know, my dear, they are probably still searching for you there among the fishes. After this I had an excellent dinner, caught the next train back to town—and here I am, having ‘something attempted, something done!’ ”

He laughed again, but the girl’s face did not relax from its anxious gravity. She appeared to be extremely worried about something, as though she were afraid to ask her next question. At last she managed to say, hesitatingly :

“ But what of Dick Thompson ? What happened to him ? ”

“ Well, if the chief’s plans turned out all right he should be, let me see—” he paused a moment, withdrew a gold watch from his breast pocket and scrutinised it musingly—“ he should be about mid-way between London and Brighton—that is if he’s a fast walker, and unless he’s had the good fortune to get a lift of some sort en route.”

“ Why, what do you mean ? ” snapped the girl, impatiently.

“ Well, after the train had resumed its rapid motion, my dear Estelle, your sadly disillusioned young man was to be invited to find his own way home, Shanks’s Mare, you know, through the tunnel and out into the beautiful open country of Surrey and Sussex. Do him good. Best exercise he’ll have had for a long while, I’ll bet ! ”

He laughed again, his whole appearance one

of entire satisfaction and self-content, then after delving into his outer pocket he withdrew a silver cigarette case from which he took a cigarette, lit it and inhaled the smoke with obvious enjoyment. The action seemed to annoy the watching girl intensely.

"Oh," she cried, a spot of red glowing angrily in her cheeks, "how *can* you treat the whole affair so lightly? How *can* you? That poor boy! Oh, I wish to God I'd never agreed to help you get the money for your play, I wish to God I'd never met you."

"Now, now, now, my dear Estelle, calm yourself. You're not on the stage, acting the young girl's lament or some such rot. Listen to me." There was a sterner, an almost menacing note in his voice. "Listen to me. Where would you be at this moment if I hadn't put this proposition up to you? Where would you be? Why, playing one-line servant girl parts, 'The carriage is waiting, my lord'—in a third rate touring company. You—with your talent. Good Lord! Don't be a fool, girl. We had to have the money, and besides it's only a loan, we'll pay it back as I promised you, directly my play succeeds—which it will, you know it will. There's not a dull line in it, nothing but pure, original wit. It's bound to succeed—and with you as leading lady—why, Estelle, you'll have the world at your feet! Don't be a fool, my dear girl. If you're squeamish, look on it as an investment. Unknown to himself this Thompson has had

the privilege of investing two thousand pounds in an endeavour to brighten London's otherwise dull theatrical horizon. He'll get it back—we'll even give him interest on it—if the play runs for two years! Anyway the thing's done now, and jolly successfully too. We're safe out of it—with the swag!"

"Yes," murmured Estelle, looking a little more composed, "but I can't help thinking of that poor boy. What must he think of me? What——"

"Oh, do shut up talking like a second-rate tragedienne," interrupted Sherwood, irritably, "you should have thought all that out before. It's a jolly good experience for the young cub. Teach him to be more particular as to his company in future. Cheap at the price, in fact. Anyway, you thought of it in the first place, didn't you? I had no idea what you were up to until the chief told me that Dudey had information that McGrory's ex-girl was blackmailing young Thompson on her own account."

"McGrory's ex-girl?" Estelle's voice was full of loathing and contempt. "Is *that* what they call me?"

Sherwood glanced at her curiously, but replied in a light tone:

"Well, how else? You were a member of his gang, weren't you?"

"Yes." Estelle shuddered. "I was, but I couldn't stick it for long, Ben. I thought I might get on to the money that way. I hadn't

a very definite idea about it, but thought something might crop up. But . . . well, I couldn't have stuck it another week for a million pounds. I just cleared out and tried to think of some scheme on my own."

"And then you met Thompson," put in Sherwood quietly.

Estelle nodded.

"Yes," she said, "and then I met Thompson. Oh God, I do feel ghastly when I think of him. He was really such a nice boy. I went out with him once or twice before this idea ever dawned on me. Then one day he asked me to marry him. Of course, I hadn't the slightest intention and was just going to refuse, when suddenly this . . . this devilish idea came to me. I told him I wasn't sure, wanted time to think, all that sort of thing, and asked him to write and ask me again in a week. He did, such a nice letter, and . . . and . . . well, I used it. First of all I told him a lot of lies about my past—which he wouldn't believe. Gradually I convinced him by saying that unless he handed me two thousand in cash I would make the letter public. By this time, naturally, he wasn't at all keen on marrying me, and . . . well, it wasn't very difficult after that. He was bringing the money down by this train, meeting me at Brighton, where I was to hand him the letter after receiving the notes. That was the original idea, then you told me you had found out about it all through your gang—I got your letter this morning—also that

McGrory knew about it, and . . . well, that's how it all happened."

"It's quite extraordinary," said Sherwood, in a somewhat musing tone, "that in order to get the money, I should have joined the one group which had knowledge of McGrory's gang, and by so doing managed to save the two thousand for you. For after all, my dear, I couldn't allow you to proceed with your plan all by yourself. You hadn't a hope of success anyway, and after McGrory had pocketed the money he would still have been after you. That's why I sent you that letter telling you to meet me and not wait in Brighton for your friend Thompson and his money. McGrory knew what you were up to, and in fact it was through his information and the chief's knowledge of what he was doing that I found out anything about it. Then I hit upon the brilliant notion of letting the chief's plan be carried to its natural conclusion, since I knew that I would be in charge of the proceedings. In that way I got rid of McGrory—who might have molested you afterwards—and obtained possession of the money. Taking everything into consideration, Estelle, that money belongs to the two of us far more than to any of the other . . . well, shall we say, to our fellow artists. But now, about the letter. What have you done with it? Where is it?"

"I posted it on to Thompson this evening," said the girl slowly.

"You posted it this evening? Before you

knew if we'd been successful? You fool?"

"I don't care," cried Estelle passionately. "I was sick . . . sick to death of the whole affair. I've never done anything so shabby in my life before, and I thought I might possibly be saved from doing it at the eleventh hour. Anyway, it's the last time I do anything of the kind, that I'll swear."

"You are a fool, my dear Estelle," said Sherwood, speaking very calmly and bitterly. "We could have used that letter again. And also, my girl, it's not your last time yet."

"Not . . . ? What do you mean?"

The girl gazed at him, her eyes dilated with unbelieving horror.

"What I say. I, for one, am not going to be content with two thousand. There's all McGrory's hoard waiting for us; the whole gang has been locked up, the money's there, literally asking to be picked up. It's as much ours as his. Why shouldn't we take it?"

"But . . . it's downright robbery," gasped the girl.

"No more so than blackmail. Oh, don't be so virtuous, my dear; you're not a little paragon, by any means. And it's not robbery. We don't know the legal owners, we only know the illegal owners. There's not the slightest reason why we shouldn't remove it. The people to whom it belonged originally have got used to being without it by now, or should have, and it's going to belong to us, anyway, so don't make a song about it."

"You can do what you like," suddenly cried the girl, a determined look on her set face, "but I tell you I'm not having anything to do with it. You don't know where it's kept, where McGrory's place is, and I certainly am not going to enlighten you."

"Oh, so that's it. Well, young lady, we shall see all about that. You know what happens when thieves fall out? What's to prevent me from gently intimating your proper name and address to the high authorities and getting you placed under lock and key for your last little effort, eh?"

A look of incredulous unbelief, quickly followed by one of fear, overshadowed Estelle's white face. She stood stock still for a moment, staring at him as though she had never seen him before, then very slowly, in almost a whisper, she spoke:

"I would never have believed it possible that Ben Sherwood could be such an utter cad. Either you've changed entirely or I've been a blind fool all along."

The man saw he had gone too far. Laughing rather shakily, he said:

"Oh, come Estelle, let's leave it at that. And don't let's quarrel. We've been good friends up to now. We'll just clear McGrory's lot and then return to the honest boards once more. Be reasonable, dear; it's only common sense."

Estelle made no reply for a moment or two, but then she turned on her companion sharply.

"What about your chief, as you call him? Won't he be on your track directly you don't turn up with the money?"

Sherwood gave a smirk of self-satisfaction. Something seemed to please him intensely.

"But I am going to turn up," he said, "I'm going to give him two thousand Bank of England notes, my dear; I shall have to hurry, I'm ten minutes late already."

"But . . ." Estelle's eyes were full of bewilderment. "I don't understand. You're going to give him the money?" A note of hope had crept into her voice.

"Not on your life," cried Sherwood, quickly, "I'm going to give him two thousand counterfeit Bank of England notes. Here they are."

He drew from an outer pocket a large pocket-book, similar to the first one he had shown her, equally well-brimmed with notes.

All hope died out of the girl's face: she recoiled a step, and then said softly, as though she were speaking to herself.

"You . . . you had arranged it all along. You were determined to get McGrory's money."

"I was," said Sherwood, bluntly, "and I still am. And you're going to be a sensible girl, aren't you, and come along with me, without any more trouble. You know you'll have to in the end."

"All right," said Estelle, listlessly.

She felt sick at heart at having allowed herself to fall into the power of this man, whom she

now recognised as being a quite unscrupulous scoundrel. His suggestion that they should obtain two thousand, no matter how, in order to stage his play, and give her an artistic triumph, had sounded so plausible, so delightfully adventurous, that she had glossed over the more sordid part of the affair; but it was this side of it which she now fully realised and which caused her to curse the day on which she had fallen in with his plans. But—there was no going back now. She was in the mire and to get out was a far more difficult matter.

“Good,” said Sherwood, quickly. Gone now was all trace of the bully which he had appeared to be a moment before. He was again charming and suave. “Come along, Estelle. Put on the darkest clothes you’ve got and the hat which covers your face most. Don’t bother if it’s in fashion or not.” He laughed. “I won’t be critical this evening.”

The girl realised the hopelessness of any further attempt to bend this man from his will. Under his watchful eye she quickly clothed herself in a long, navy-blue coat, and tiny, black felt hat, and then turning round saw that he was holding the door open: evidently he had no intention of wasting any longer than was necessary. She preceded him down the stairs and into the street. It was not yet very late but the locality seemed to be deserted. Sherwood took her arm in his and hurried her along the road. A passing taxi was crawling along by the kerb as they

turned a corner and Sherwood hailed the driver. He gave him an address and pushed the girl into the vehicle before him.

They were very silent during that drive which lasted some considerable time. At last the taxi drew up and Sherwood turned to his companion.

"Estelle," he said, "I shall only be a few minutes. Just wait."

Like a shadow he disappeared into the night. Thoughts of flight came to the trembling girl. Should she give the taxi-man another address and so escape from her now hated ally? Should she . . . ? But the girl knew only too well that it would be useless. She had very little money on her. How could she hope to evade Sherwood's skilful search for her, which he would undoubtedly make should she attempt flight? No, the only thing was to go through with it now, in the hope that some time in the future she would be able to repay Thompson and break definitely with Sherwood. She sat motionless staring hopelessly into the blackness, her face white and set.

Sherwood was away about twelve minutes. He came back smiling and thrust his head into the cab.

"All's well," he cried happily, and then lowered his voice quickly. "Tell me, Estelle, somewhere quite near McGrory's headquarters. Not the street, of course.

The girl mentioned a street in Whitechapel,

to which Sherwood instructed the driver to go, and then jumped into the taxi beside Estelle.

"He lapped those notes up like anything. Actually congratulated me on the success of the undertaking. He doesn't know how successful it was! But really those notes were jolly good imitations, I must say. I got them from old Vickers. It's extraordinary what you can get from old Vickers. He seems to have a stock of every possible thing that can be useful in the underworld."

He felt Estelle shudder away from him as he pronounced the last word.

"Yes, *underworld*, Estelle. Whatever we may have been when we were on the stage, you know we can't very well claim to be anything other than members of the underworld just now."

He laughed gaily; the fact did not seem to disturb him, but something in the girl's attitude made him silent and for the rest of the time that the taxi took to reach the address which the driver had been given, they did not speak. Estelle was busy with her own thoughts, wondering what could be occupying the fertile brain of the man beside her. He gave no sign, but stared straight in front of him, his eyes half closed, cigarette between his lips.

At last the taxi drew up and Sherwood paid it off.

"Lead on, Estelle," he whispered. "There's nothing to fear, remember. They're all in gaol."

He gave her a gentle push. The girl led the way along the street and turned into a side alley of sombre aspect. She moved quickly, drawing her coat around her even more closely, almost involuntarily, as though to shut out the sordidness of the locality. She stopped abruptly before a door.

"Well?" whispered Sherwood.

"He lives there," she said. "Two rooms only on the ground floor. There's nobody else in the house."

"How do you know?" The man's voice was suspicious.

"I know well enough," Estelle laughed bitterly.

At once she felt Sherwood's hand on her mouth.

"Quiet," he admonished. "All right. I believe you."

She looked at him and saw that he was grinning.

"Just you watch." He was speaking in whispers. "I've learnt a lot since I left the stage."

From his pocket he withdrew an instrument made, apparently, of wire, but Estelle caught only a fleeting glimpse of it. For a space of time not longer than a minute Sherwood was busy on the lock, then triumphantly he stepped forward and pushed open the door. Estelle followed him into the house with a little shudder. The place was full of bitter memories to her. Its sordidness, she knew, was not merely that

of appearance. Yet much as the house appalled her, much as she feared her companion, she would have cared still less to have had to remain outside, alone, in that sinister alley.

As soon as he had shut the door Sherwood flooded the passage with light from a powerful torch which he had taken from his pocket. There were two doors, one on either side of the passage. The first which he tried, opened into a little parlour. He passed one quick glance round it and then turned to the other door. It was that of McGrory's bedroom. Sherwood entered it rapidly and started a search, the girl watching him curiously from the door. She was amazed at the extraordinary fleetness and skill of his movements, as he tapped every article in the room, wasting no time and never pausing for one moment in his task. Surely, she thought, this unusual proficiency could not be the result of the few weeks since they had started their partnership, since they had left the stage and engaged in this perilous undertaking. For the first time it dawned on Estelle that she was in the presence of a very clever burglar, one well versed in the arts of illegal ingenuity, and she knew that such skill could only have been obtained through years of experience. The thought sickened her still more.

Immediately he had entered Sherwood had carefully drawn heavy shutters over the windows and barred them. He lit an oil lamp which was placed on the table and illumined

the scene. Sherwood then carefully examined every nook and cranny of the room, and after about twenty minutes he stood up, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Old McGrory took good care that no one should get his stuff, didn't he? Where on earth has he put it?"

Estelle watched him and caught herself hoping that he would fail in his quest. Suddenly she saw his glance fall on the bed.

"Good God!" he said, obviously talking to himself. "Fancy forgetting that."

He quickly pulled the blankets away and threw the mattress on to the floor. Taking a large knife from his pocket he ripped it open and in a very few moments after searching through the opening which he had made, he withdrew his hand and stared at it. Estelle saw that it contained a jewel case. The man quickly opened this and a string of pearls was disclosed. With a low chuckle of joy Sherwood bent to his task and in a few moments had ransacked the whole mattress, leaving no portion of it unexamined. Quite a good haul was laid out on the table, but excepting for that one necklace it was all in notes and cash.

"Yes," said Sherwood as though to himself, "I had heard that. I was rather surprised to find those pearls. Old McGrory was supposed to touch nothing except cash."

As he pronounced these words, however, the man stiffened before Estelle's eyes and remained motionless, like a dog pointing. It was obvious

that he was listening intently and a panic of fear went through Estelle, who had heard nothing. She strained her ears and a sound immediately became discernible. Somebody had opened the front door and was approaching the door of the room in which they were. Sherwood shot a hand out to extinguish the lamp, but even as he reached it he realised that it was too late. A voice came from the door.

"Leave that lamp alone."

Estelle saw the figure of a man standing there, a man dressed in well-cut clothes and holding an automatic in his right hand, which he kept unswervingly aimed towards her companion. Instantly she recognised the figure.

"The Dude," she whispered.

But the man paid no attention to her. He seemed struck dumb at the appearance of Sherwood, whom he was covering with his automatic.

"Good God!" he said, "It's Sherwood."

Sherwood had apparently completely recovered his composure. He stood up and smiled in a friendly manner.

"Hullo, Dudey, didn't know the chief had given you this job too."

"Did the chief send you here?" asked the newcomer.

"Yes," said Sherwood, easily. "Gave me to understand that there was quite a lot of stuff to be found in this mattress. Sent me along to collect it. I didn't know you were coming too, though."

"Er . . . yes." It was clearly obvious to the listening Estelle that the latest arrival was uncomfortable. "I asked for leave to finish up my job with McGrory by collecting any stuff that he might have left about here. But I think it's very odd, Sherwood, that he should have told me nothing about you."

"No more odd," remarked Sherwood, quietly, "than that he should not have told me about you."

"No. Funny business. Well, if you are getting the stuff I suppose it's all right. How did the show go off?"

"Landed it as easily as anything," said Sherwood, pleasantly. "Put up that gun, Dudey. Makes me feel awkward."

With an apologetic laugh the newcomer replaced the gun in his pocket. Then he caught sight of the girl, for the first time.

"Gosh! What are you doing here, Estelle?"

Sherwood quickly came to her rescue.

"She's one of us now," he said. "Chief took her in this evening."

"When?" said the Dude, suspiciously.

"I took her round, must have been after you had seen him. Shake hands with her, Dudey. You are on the same side again now. Both ex-McGroryites."

He laughed brightly. His manner was convincing. The man known as the Dude smiled as if reassured, walked over to Estelle and held out his hand. In doing so he presented his back to Sherwood who did not hesitate for a

second. Picking up the long-bladed knife which he had used for slitting open the mattress he plunged it into the other's back.

The Dude fell without a sound.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR LYNTON walked through the streets on his return journey from his visit to Vickers. His temper was ruffled: the old man's short way with him had annoyed him, and his obvious contempt for the young Inspector's inexperience in his methods, rankled. Lynton knew very well that what Vickers had said was perfectly true: Scotland Yard would do its best to overlook any little delinquencies on the part of old Vickers for the very good reason that he was so useful with his information. Scotland Yard also was not in the habit of asking any awkward questions with regard to the source of such intelligence; yet for the life of him Lynton could think of no other means whereby to start in his search for the man who had got clear away with the two thousand pounds, for the man whose capture meant his own rehabilitation in Tudor's eyes.

"Dash it," said Lynton to himself, "fancy being turned out of that old receiver's house just as summarily as the crooks who go to visit him."

Suddenly the young man laughed. He could not deny that the situation had its humours. Their rôles had been so reversed: surely never before had an honoured representative of the

law been treated with such a total lack of respect, such supreme scorn and disdain by one who should, in reality, seek to propitiate and at any rate pretend to do all he could to aid the police.

Lynton now decided that he had done quite enough for the day, that the shocks and unexpected surprises which he had experienced were sufficient for the moment. His brain was tired. No doubt after a night's rest his resource would not fail him and he would think of some method of getting a line on the mysterious individual who at that moment was richer by two thousand pounds which were not his own. He stepped out briskly, heading for his lodgings; withdrew a cigarette from his case and lit it. It was useless to worry any more about the matter; a good sleep would revive his jaded wits.

Suddenly as he walked an idea flashed across his mind. It came out of the blue; at the time he had been scarcely thinking of the man who had so completely fooled him that evening, but subconsciously he must have been reviewing the situation. In the first moment Lynton regarded it as an inspiration, but as in great excitement he turned it over in his mind he began to realise that there would be difficulties, grave difficulties, to overcome. Still the more he thought of it the more did he like the notion.

Inspector Lynton was not a man who put off doing anything for longer than he could help. In spite of its obstacles the young man

was fairly certain that his plan would provide the shortest method of tracking the unknown thief, and he came to his decision quickly. An importuning taxi was passing him at the moment, and signalling to it he gave the driver the private address of Superintendent Tudor, realising that this distinguished official would most certainly no longer be at Scotland Yard. He jumped into the vehicle and twenty minutes later paid off the driver at the door of Tudor's house. He rang the bell and was admitted, and after giving his name was shown into a small sitting-room, evidently used by the Superintendent as a study. In a few minutes the rather awesome figure of his superior entered the room and closed the door.

Tudor looked at the young man interrogatively. Inspector Lynton had taken a liberty: it was an understood thing that only on matters of supreme importance was the Superintendent to be worried after he had left his office. Lynton jumped to his feet.

"I apologise, sir, for worrying you at this hour——"

"Cut out the cackle," said Tudor, quickly. "Presumably you've got something important to tell me, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Yes, sir. I've had an idea."

Tudor motioned him to a chair and sat down himself opposite the young Inspector.

"Well?"

"It's like this, sir. I've just been to see Vickers."

"What about?"

Tudor's voice was sharp.

"I wanted to see if I could get a line on the source of his information with regard to the McGrory gang, sir."

For a moment Tudor said nothing, then he looked up and stared at Lynton.

"Well? Did Vickers tell you anything?"

Lynton smiled.

"Shut up like an oyster, sir. Wouldn't tell me a word."

"I'm not surprised. You know you've established a precedent, Inspector, a precedent of which I am not sure that I approve. Vickers is a very useful man to us. We've never yet asked him for the source of his information."

"I know, sir. As a matter of fact I rather gave him to understand that I was the young inexperienced officer. You see I can do that, sir, because I have only been at the Yard a few months."

Tudor smiled.

"I see. If for no other reason. Well, go on, Inspector."

"I thought, sir, that if I could get hold of the source of Vickers' information with regard to McGrory I might conceivably be getting a line on the man who cleared off with the two thousand, because he also must have been in the know. He wasn't one of McGrory's lot, but he must have known all about McGrory's plans."

"Yes," said Tudor slowly, "that's reasonable, but I understand that you have failed?"

"Yes, sir. I don't see how that particular line can be explored any further. Vickers won't co-operate."

"I could have saved you that visit," said Tudor, quietly, "if you had told me what you were about."

"Excuse me, sir," said Lynton, greatly daring, "but when I left you, sir, you weren't inclined for conversation with me."

For a moment the Superintendent stared at the young Inspector, then he laughed outright.

"Well, my lad, you don't deserve much sympathy, do you?"

"No, sir. I quite understand that."

"Right. I presume that it wasn't with regard to this visit to Vickers that you have come here to-night?"

"No, sir. Having left him and realising that I was more or less where I started, I thought I'd leave everything until I had slept on it and trust to getting an idea to-morrow. The moment I turned all thoughts of work from my mind I immediately got an idea."

Tudor smiled.

"Very often the way. A brain wave?"

"I am hoping so, sir. It's . . . er, a little . . . er, irregular."

Tudor raised his eyebrows, but said nothing and waited for the young man to go on.

"I should very much like your permission, sir, your authority if I may ask for it, to instruct the Inspector at Brighton to prefer no charge to-morrow morning against McGrory."

"I beg your pardon?" said Tudor.

"I want McGrory to be set free to-morrow morning, sir."

For a moment Tudor paused. Then:

"You aren't getting a benevolent bee in your bonnet, are you? You wouldn't like me to open the doors of Brixton and Dartmoor, by any chance? Are you so keen on work, Inspector, that you want a chance of chasing a few more poor rogues?"

His voice was heavy with sarcasm, and Lynton knew that he would have to press his request pretty hard in order to get a sympathetic hearing.

"Listen, sir. . . ."

"Yes," broke in Tudor. "I will listen for a little longer, Inspector, but not much. We're playing cards upstairs and my wife doesn't like me to be away from her too long out of business hours, so I will ask you to confine the description of your hair-brained scheme to as few words as possible."

"Very good, sir. My reason for suggesting that McGrory should be freed is this. At the moment he knows, of course, that his own scheme failed, but he thinks that the two thousand is still in the possession of its rightful owner. I suggest that when he is released he should be told the truth . . . told in some casual way, of course. He musn't suspect that we want him to help us to trace this man, because even though the fellow did him down I don't believe he'd give him away to us. Honour among thieves, you know.

McGrory's no fool. He'll gather what is meant . . . and he'll want his revenge. He'll be out after that fellow and I suggest that for the next few days he should be shadowed pretty carefully."

Lynton paused and glanced eagerly towards his superior, but the latter made no movement, and after a moment the Inspector continued:

"Or perhaps it would be better if instead of being freed he was given some chance to escape, sir? I've said he's no fool: he'd take the slightest chance that was offered him. Perhaps you'd prefer it that way, sir?"

Tudor remained silent, staring at the table in front of him; he gave no sign of interest in the plan the Inspector had unfolded to him. The latter gazed at him intently, anxious to glean some clue from his superior's expression which would give him an idea as to whether he were succeeding or not; but the Superintendent remained impassive.

"You see, sir," said Lynton earnestly, "I don't see how, without making use of McGrory, we can possibly find out anything about the mystery man. Of course, something might turn up; he might pass the notes, for instance, or try to, and that won't be easy for some time. We've got the numbers all right. Still it could be done without our being able to get hold of the fellow, but I don't think he's likely to do it just at present. So the chances are that unless we make use of McGrory there's going to be a considerable interval wasted before

picking him up. McGrory may conceivably lead us to the man whom we want at once, and even if he doesn't in, say, a week, there's no harm done because we can pull McGrory in again any time."

Tudor suddenly looked up. It was quite obvious that he had made up his mind and Lynton waited, with bated breath, for his decision; but Tudor did not speak for a few moments. He remained silent, staring at the younger man with a very serious expression on his face, perhaps choosing his words so that there could be no possible misunderstanding as to their meaning. This was the way with Superintendent Tudor. He arrived at a decision quickly enough, and stuck to it once it was made, but in giving instructions or his authority he was apt to be extremely careful in the phrasing of his words in order to avoid any chance of misconstruction.

"Inspector Lynton," he said, finally, "understand that I dislike your plan. However, I am inclined to agree with you that it will be the quickest method. There is one thing, though, which I insist upon, and it is this: there can be no question of McGrory being brought up to-morrow and no charge being preferred against him. If that is done a re-arrest in a few days' time would not look at all well; McGrory, I think, would have a legitimate complaint. No, I won't approve of that. If, however, you and Inspector Birch at Brighton could so arrange it between you that McGrory escapes, I leave

the matter entirely in your hands. I will not bring up the subject against you or Birch for ten days. If at the end of that time McGrory has not succeeded in doing what you expected, what you think he will do for you, then I want to see him back again in the cells somewhere in England ready to take his place in the dock, charged with his attempted robbery and with all the other little things which are being marked up against him at the moment in the office."

"I promise you that, sir," said Lynton eagerly.

"But I want you to understand one thing very clearly," continued Tudor gravely. "I am not going to interfere with you, Inspector. This is your chance of getting back to your position in Scotland Yard, which you have not actually vacated, but which I warn you you will leave as surely as fate if you don't find the man who took that two thousand. On the other hand, I will not give you my official approval for this escapade. Unofficially I tell you now that I will look at it with a blind eye, and I will see that the Commissioner does so too; but I will not look at it with a blind eye if you let McGrory out of your clutches, and if you don't succeed in getting the man you are after. Is that good enough?"

"Yes, sir."

Tudor stood up.

"I have a game of cards upstairs which your arrival interrupted, so . . . good-night, Inspector."

"Good night, sir, and thank you."

As Inspector Lynton left the house he glanced at his watch. There was just time to catch the last train down to Brighton. He determined on a change of plan; he would go straight to Brighton now, find Inspector Birch and attempt to collaborate with him. He thought of Tudor as a taxi bore him quickly towards Victoria. A hard man, a very hard man, but a sportsman all the same.

When Lynton arrived at Victoria he saw he had still about twenty minutes in which to catch the 12.5. He rang up the Yard, advising them of his intentions, then wandered on to the platform. After getting his ticket, and selecting a carriage at the furthest end of the train, he sat down, lit a cigarette and withdrew from an outer pocket a newspaper which he had bought earlier in the evening. He sought for the article headed "CAPTURE OF McGRORY'S GANG," read it through carefully and was delighted to note that it was reported the two thousand pounds had been returned to its rightful owner. Thank goodness, the papers had not got hold of the news of his tremendous blunder—for the honour of the force it must be kept out of them at all costs.

He spent the remainder of the journey making notes in his pocket-book, and on arriving at Brighton hastened with all possible speed to the police station. He asked for Inspector Birch and in a few minutes was ushered into his office.

The Inspector regarded Lynton with the utmost surprise. It was extremely unusual for him to receive visitors at that hour and he had believed his caller to be peacefully sleeping, at that moment, somewhere in London.

"What on earth's the matter, Inspector?" cried Birch, motioning him to a chair. "I thought you weren't coming down until the morning. No further news, is there?"

Lynton shook his head.

"Birch, I'm afraid we were both rather badly taken in by that 'Mr. Thompson.' A most perfect disguise, I must say, but it doesn't make me feel any the less foolish for all that. I've spent the whole evening trying to think out some line of action by which to land the fellow—and I think I've got it."

A gleam of interest lit up the other's face. He had passed a rather miserable evening, realising that he too had been fooled by the impostor; a fact which was bound to form a bad mark against him in the force. He looked at Lynton eagerly, therefore, and enquired:

"What are you going to do?"

"I've been to the Superintendent to-night," went on Lynton, "and put it to him. Had to get his permission first, of course."

He paused and Birch impatiently urged him on.

"Well? Did he give it?"

"Yes . . . and no," replied Lynton slowly. "He gave me his unofficial permission, but officially he knows nothing about it. He has given us—you're in it with me, you know—

ten days to nab the fellow before he takes disciplinary measures."

"I see," said Birch thoughtfully, "well, what's the plan?"

"This," went on Lynton, an excited note in his voice. "McGrory's got to escape. Don't look so surprised, Tudor's agreed to it. He's got to escape so that when he's been tactfully told why his gang failed, and that the two thousand was handed to an impostor, he'll do all in his power to trace the man and have his revenge. You see, at present he thinks that the real Thompson got the money; all we've got to do for the next few days is to shadow him. If he's lucky in his search we'll be lucky too. He finds the man—we nab him and incidentally get McGrory again afterwards. Simple yet most effective, I hope. Anyhow, it's the best way I can think of."

Birch was looking at him with rather reluctant admiration. It was obvious that he thought the plan a good one.

"I see," he said. "Yes, it's quite a good way. And when do you want him to escape?"

"Sooner the better," replied Lynton. "He mustn't come up for trial in the morning, so why not give him the opportunity now? He'll get away easier, too, at night. I'll just go down and see him and make him aware of a few facts he doesn't at present in the least suspect, while you arrange the means of escape and have two men detailed off to follow him. Got that?"

"Yes," said Birch, quickly, "I can manage

that all right. When you leave him the door need not be locked. Just shut it behind you. I'll get someone to drop the key out of the lock. There's a small door leading up here nearly opposite his cell. This will be left unlocked also—so I don't think he'll have much trouble in making his get-away."

He smiled significantly.

"He'll have changed a lot if he does," agreed Lynton, laughing. "Well, I'll go down now and get my part of it over. So long."

Birch leaned over his desk and pressed a bell which was answered almost immediately by a uniformed policeman.

"Show Inspector Lynton down to McGrory's cell," ordered Birch, "and then come back here to me at once. I've got instructions for you."

"Very good, sir."

The policeman held the door open for Lynton and led the way down some steps and along a corridor to McGrory's cell. He unlocked the door and Lynton entered.

The cell was in complete darkness, but by the light of his powerful torch the Inspector was able to see his quarry lying, apparently asleep, on a bed in the corner. Lynton walked over to the recumbent man, laid his hand on his shoulder and shook him. With a startled grunt McGrory sat upright.

"Evening, McGrory. Sorry to disturb you so late but there's a little thing you can tell me which I'd like to know very much indeed."

Dazzled by the light McGrory did not answer for a moment, then pushing the blanket from him he sat on the bed staring at Lynton, a malicious glare in his eyes.

"What's the game now, Inspector Lynton?"

"Listen," said the young Inspector. "I want to know which of your gang walked off with the boodle this afternoon?"

"Did what?"

"Walked off with the boodle, with the two thousand jimmy o' goblins."

"The most likely person to have walked off with it," said McGrory, scornfully, "is yourself, Inspector. Last person I saw with them was you."

"And the last person I saw with them," said Lynton quickly, "was the man I thought to be Thompson. Made up very well he was. The only trouble is that we've discovered it wasn't Thompson."

"What say?"

McGrory leant forward, a frown on his face. He was evidently interested, deeply interested; Lynton vouchsafed himself a hidden smile. The plan was working nicely.

"Now cut out that play-acting with me," he said sharply. "You know perfectly well that somehow or other one of your men has got away with this stuff, although you've been unlucky enough to get nabbed. Out with it, McGrory; it may help, you know, when you go up before the judge. If you will tell me who this man is and where he is likely to be

found, well I'll say a good word for you from the witness box."

"I don't know a damn thing about it," said McGrory, angrily. "I haven't got any other men in my lot except the chaps in the cells all round, and you know that as well as I do."

"You haven't mentioned one whom I know about," said Lynton quickly. "Gentleman who goes by the name of the Dude, I understand?"

"Oh," said McGrory, "so you know about him. He's a new recruit. A bit too raw, I thought, to take on this job. He's lucky, damn lucky."

"So it wasn't him," said Lynton slowly.

"The Dude?" said McGrory laughing. "He's just a fashion plate on two legs. Useful at times, I'll allow, but not for this sort of job. Look here, Inspector, you just tell me all this again. I swear I don't know one word about it."

Very patiently and slowly, speaking each word distinctly, Lynton repeated the story of the disappearance of the money, and how very neatly fooled he had been. All the time he watched McGrory's face intently. The man listened patiently, then, Lynton's narrative coming to an end, he remained for some time apparently lost in thought. Suddenly he gave vent to an awe-inspiring oath and turned on Lynton.

"I tell you I . . ."

"Shut up," said the Inspector, quickly. "You just tell me the name of this man, what he looks like—when he doesn't look like Thompson,

that is—and where he's to be found. I want him."

"You want him, do you? My God, not half so much as I do. Do you know what this means, Lynton? This fellow must have known about my plans. Now I understand! He's the fellow who gave away the whole show to the Yard. He's the. . . ."

The man's flow of words stopped as Lynton rose to his feet.

"I see you're not going to talk sense, McGrory," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry. I thought you might have er, well lightened your sentence a bit by giving us a little information."

He looked at McGrory and could scarcely restrain the laughter within him at the man's outraged countenance. McGrory had evidently taken the news hard. All exactly in accordance with the Inspector's plan. He moved to the door of the cell and stood by it.

"I'll give you one last chance, McGrory. Are you going to help or are you not?"

"Hell!" almost screamed McGrory. "I wish to God I could get my fingers on that man's throat! I'd teach him to come in between me and my stuff! I'd teach him to give me away to the Yard! I'd"

McGrory's voice died away as he realised he was talking to himself. Detective Inspector Lynton had left the cell, closing the door behind him.

ESTELLE dashed down the street, her heart beating violently, her mind sick and numb with horror at the ghastly sight she had just witnessed. All the while her ears were strained to catch any sound of pursuit; she knew that she was literally flying for her life, that this fiend into whose clutches she had fallen would hesitate at nothing in order to ensure her silence and his own safety. She sped madly on down the deserted streets, recking little where she was going and caring less, so long as it was far away from that sinister room, from that dead body with its frightful wound. The thought of it filled her with renewed panic. She redoubled her failing efforts until she had gone nearly a mile from McGrory's den, then lessened her speed; her breath coming in painful gasps, she darted a swift glance behind her.

With heartfelt relief and thankfulness she saw that no one was in sight; apparently she had successfully evaded the man whom she now feared and detested with all her being. Finding herself safe from pursuit she slackened her headlong flight to a rapid walk and sought to banish from her mind the sight of that vicious knife. Gradually becoming a little calmer she tried to assemble her thoughts; to decide on

her course of action. Bitterly she dwelt on her own crass stupidity and blindness; her entire ignorance of the fact that she had been led by flattering promises of a brilliant career to allow herself to be made the tool of this scoundrel, whose dupe she now realised she had been all along.

The play—she laughed cynically as she thought of it; of the numerous occasions on which she had asked Sherwood to let her read it; of the endless, plausible excuses he had given for not being able to do so. How absurdly trustful she had been—and how devilishly cleverly he had used her. Obviously his object had been to get her help merely to obtain the two thousand pounds. God! How gullible, how insanely credulous she had been! Tears of self-contempt and anger rolled down her cheeks; she stood still in a quiet alley, leant against a wall and gave vent to her despair.

In a few moments she became calmer and looked around anxiously fearing she might have attracted attention: but there was no one in sight, and carefully wiping away her tears she started off once more with a set face, her lips drawn tightly together.

“Keep a stiff upper lip, my dear,” she said to herself, “you’ve got yourself into this mess and now you’ve got to get yourself out of it. No use crying. Got to do something quickly.”

She saw that now her only safety lay in making a clean breast of it all to the police. The task would be intensely unpleasant, as would the

consequences, but it was her only chance of once more regaining that peace of mind which had been hers before she had ever agreed to Sherwood's suggestion. Should she do this to-night or wait until the morning? She pondered this question a moment, but quickly decided on immediate action for two reasons. Her one desire was to get it over, to be once more on the side of the law; and also where else could she go that night? To return to her lodgings was impossible; it would be the sheerest folly. By doing so she would be placing herself once more in Sherwood's power, and as she had been the only witness of his terrible crime, her life, she knew, was in the utmost peril.

Engrossed in these thoughts she suddenly turned a corner and found herself directly opposite a police station. The sight caused her to stand motionless and nerve herself for the coming interview. Suddenly another thought crossed her mind. Sherwood had spoken a lot about Scotland Yard, had mentioned a certain Lynton as being the police officer who had handed him the notes. By this time, she was sure, the man must have realised how fooled he had been, must be hot in pursuit of the impostor. Should she go to Scotland Yard itself, seek out this Lynton and tell him her story? That surely was the better way. He would be much more likely to credit it than would the ordinary policeman who had not already experienced Sherwood's marvellous plausibility and cunning. Perhaps, were she to go into this

police station facing her, they might even discount his part in her tale altogether, thinking it was a ruse whereby to divert suspicion from herself. No, her obvious course was to go to Scotland Yard. But how to get there? She hadn't the slightest idea in which direction it lay. Estelle feverishly examined her purse to see whether she could manage a taxi fare. To her relief she found she had still nearly two pounds left. In a few moments she secured a taxi and directed the driver to go quickly to Scotland Yard; he glanced at her curiously but made no comment.

In less than ten minutes she found herself at her destination and enquired of a friendly policeman for an officer named Lynton.

"Inspector Lynton, miss," replied the man. "I'm afraid you can't see him now. He's just phoned through to say he's gone to Brighton. He'll be back to-morrow though."

The news came as a terrible disappointment to Estelle. It had never occurred to her that in all probability the Inspector would not be at the Yard at that hour. The policeman saw her dismay and said:

"Wouldn't anybody else do, miss? There's Inspector Hurst you could see, if it's something important."

For a moment Estelle pondered as to whether she had better leave the matter until she was able to see Lynton, but in a flash the scene in that fatal room crossed her mind and she knew she must act now; there was no time to be

lost. She looked up at the policeman who was staring at her in rather a puzzled way.

"Important?" Estelle laughed hysterically. "Yes, I don't think there's much doubt about that. All right then, where is Inspector Hurst?"

"This way, miss."

The policeman led the way along a corridor and down some steps. He knocked at a door marked "Private," and on an invitation to enter, did so, followed by Estelle.

"Young lady to see you, Inspector Hurst. Says it's important. She really wanted to see Inspector Lynton, but of course, he's away."

"Right," said Hurst, and the policeman turned and left the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

A middle-aged man was seated at a desk and looked up in surprise at his visitor. There was a kindly look in his eyes, which somewhat reassured the girl, and made her feel a little more at ease.

"Well, miss," he said, in a genial tone, "and what can I do for you?"

In as few words as possible Estelle told him her story; about her part in the blackmail episode, her reason for doing it, the visit to McGrory's den to collect his hoard—and the murder. As she spoke the man stared at her fixedly in a sort of dumbfounded amazement. This was obviously not at all the sort of tale he had expected to hear. A doubting expression crossed his face, which vanished immediately when she came to her description of the murder.

The fear and horror in her voice was too genuine to fail to convince the most cynical; Hurst made no comment but heard her out in silence and then rapped out a question.

"You know the way to this place? You could lead us there? Now, I mean?"

"Yes," said Estelle, firmly.

"Good."

Detective Inspector Hurst leant over his desk and pressed a bell. The same policeman answered it and was instructed to have a car got out immediately with two plain-clothes men in readiness. Then turning to Estelle, Hurst said in a pitying, sympathetic tone:

"Wouldn't you like a drink of some sort before we go, Miss Desmond?"

"No, thank you," said Estelle, quickly. "All I want is to get this over as soon as possible."

Hurst nodded his head and led the way out of the room, along a corridor and down steps to the street. Here a car was waiting drawn up by the kerb, and Estelle saw the figures of two men seated inside. Hurst helped her in, gave his men a brief outline of the affair and then asked Estelle for the direction. She gave it, and after instructing the chauffeur, Hurst jumped in beside her.

To Estelle that journey in the dead of night, in company with these silent, grim-faced policemen, was the longest and most harassing she had ever made. Her mind full of forebodings as to what they would find, of deadly self-reproach and contempt at being mixed up in

such a terrible crime; she sat hunched up in a corner of the car gazing before her with unseeing eyes. No one spoke; perhaps they all understood and respected her emotion and wished to spare her all they could.

At last the car drew up before the house from which the girl had fled in such deadly terror not so long before. Ordering the chauffeur to wait for them, Hurst helped Estelle to alight, and accompanied by his two men, led the way up the steps. He tried the front door and finding it locked motioned to his men to help him force it. They did so and in a few minutes were standing in the blackness of the hall. Hurst switched on a torch and led the way to McGrory's bedroom, which Estelle pointed out. His mind filled with visions of the terrible sight he was to see, Hurst pushed open the door and entered the room, followed closely by the others.

He gazed around in surprise, Estelle in incredulous astonishment, for there was nothing whatsoever about the room which savoured of crime and bloodshed. It appeared to be a very ordinary bedroom, simple and plain; everything was in its proper place, there was in fact, not the slightest sign of the disorder of which Estelle had warned them—no Dude and no Sherwood.

With a rather annoyed, yet not unkindly laugh, Hurst turned to the girl.

"I'm afraid you've brought us out on a wild-goose chase to-night, young woman," he said,

severely. "You've been reading too many thrillers, my girl. Just you go to bed and have a good sleep and leave the Yard in peace!"

The other two men laughed and were preparing to depart when Estelle, her voice full of passion, cried angrily:

"Oh, don't be so stupid! I tell you it's all true. Look at the mattress if you don't believe me. You'll see it's all ripped up."

With an amused grin on his face Hurst walked to the bed and pulled off the coverings. Instantly his whole manner changed; the mattress was undoubtedly ripped in two places and was also discoloured by an ominous stain. He motioned to his men to help him, and in a few moments they were gazing with horror at the dead body of a man which they had dragged out from its hiding place in the mattress.

Hurst wasted no time; he examined the body carefully and also the room, but could find no clue as to the murderer.

Turning to Estelle, he apologised for his former unbelief and then said:

"I think this is a job for Inspector Lynton. He's really on this case, you know. I'll leave a man in charge here and then we'd better get back to the Yard and send a message through to Lynton."

Nothing loth Estelle turned gladly from that room full of such sordid associations, and once more entered the car. Hurst and one of the men accompanied her. On the way the Inspector asked her what she intended to do that night.

"I'm not at all sure, Miss Desmond," he said, gravely, "whether it isn't really my duty to arrest you on that blackmail charge. But anyway, where were you going to-night?"

"Going?" said Estelle, looking up at him miserably, "I don't know. Nowhere. I can't possibly go back to my lodgings. Sherwood knows them, he sent me there in the first place. It's an awful hole," she shuddered distastefully. "A Mother Hudson runs it. I think Sherwood knows her very well. Anyway he's sure to go back there for me. No, I don't know what to do."

Hurst looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, Miss Desmond," he said, quietly, "seems to me the best thing you can do is to remain at the Yard. I won't arrest you exactly, just detain you, and you'll be much safer there too, you know, while this johnnie's at large."

Estelle looked at him gratefully; his manner was entirely sympathetic.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose that would be the best. But how about my things? Could someone get them, do you think?"

For a moment Hurst looked undecided.

"I hardly like to do that," he said, hesitatingly. "It would rather give it away to Sherwood that you've come to us. But I don't know, he's bound to think you'd do something of the sort, and this old—Mother Hudson—did you say?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, she might be useful, give us some

information, also we might be able to catch this smart lad there if he comes back looking for you. Yes, I'll go myself and see this old lady and get her to give me your things."

Estelle thanked him, and that moment the car stopped. They were back at the Yard.

Hurst instructed the chauffeur and the plain-clothes man to wait, and placed Estelle in the charge of a kindly wardress, telling her to do all she could to make Miss Desmond comfortable for the night. Then he asked quickly :

"What is the address of this Mother Hudson?"

Estelle told him, and with a cheery good-night, Hurst hastened from the room.

BEN SHERWOOD leant down and examined his victim. One glance was sufficient to prove to him that he had directed his blow shrewdly : there was no sign of life on the part of the man who had been known as "the Dude." A movement by the door caught Sherwood's eye and he looked up quickly. For a moment he thought that he had been mistaken and had seen nothing, but then in a flash he realised that he was alone. Estelle, as silently as the night all round her, had fled from the room.

With a muttered curse Sherwood leapt to his feet and ran to the front door of the house ; it was open. Quickly Sherwood looked out only just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the girl as she disappeared round the corner. The man's first inclination was to rush after her, to bring her back, then to consider what he could do in order to shut her mouth effectively as to what she had seen. But even as he took a pace forward he realised the futility of such an action. She had gone quietly, panic stricken no doubt, but if he knew anything of her character it was more than likely that her brain would remain fog-bound for a time. She was not the sort to accost the nearest policeman and bring him back at the double to show him

the corpse and murderer ; she would take some while to reason out within herself whether this course of action were fair or not.

The man smiled to himself. For the first time since he had met this girl, his dupe, he was thankful to her for this streak of loyalty. Nevertheless, Sherwood was under no delusion with regard to her eventual decision. He could rely on twenty minutes perhaps, after which he felt sure she would make up her mind and go straight to the police, who would in a very short time take possession of McGrory's house. It was up to him to see he was not in it when this took place.

Quickly returning to the house he shut and bolted the door, then retraced his steps to McGrory's bedroom and looked down once more at the body of the Dude lying motionless on the floor. The fatal knife was still sticking into the man's back, which to a great extent prevented bleeding from the wound. Sherwood leant down again beside the body and satisfied himself beyond all doubt that the man was dead ; then he stood up and looked around him. None of his actions betrayed the slightest sign that his nerves were in any way affected by the vile deed he had just committed. He stood there quite calmly, his face perfectly composed, hands absolutely steady ; he seemed to have entirely passed beyond this action, to be already intent on his next step. As his sharp eyes glanced round the room Sherwood was determining on what this should be. The

few seconds he took to do this were in no way wasted; he was making up his mind, so that once his decision was reached there would be no delay in carrying it out. It was essential that less than fifteen minutes should see him out of that house. The longer he remained the more he was in danger. He came to a decision.

Unhesitatingly and with the greatest rapidity he rearranged the room so that it was once again in order. All was just as he had found it. A few minutes later he left the house, and any casual observer glancing into McGrory's bedroom would not have known that the place had been occupied that evening; would never have suspected that anything was different from the state in which it had been left by the owner himself.

Ben Sherwood, a string of pearls in one pocket, a bulging packet of bank notes in another, made his way like a shadow in the night until he was a good mile distant from McGrory's lair. At last he found himself near the river. The hour was very late; one or two dark forms were huddled up on the seats which ran along the Embankment. Sherwood was, however, in luck. One of these was still unoccupied and he sat down to consider the situation.

There could be little doubt, and Sherwood as he thought of it grinned to himself, that his position was not an enviable one at the moment. He was wanted by the police for robbery, anyhow, if not as yet for murder. He

was wanted by McGrory himself, but on the other hand McGrory, he knew, was at the moment safely locked up in gaol in Brighton and there was every chance of his not being free again for a period of years. Sherwood made a mental note to look in the papers the next day and see what sentence the man received. There was another also who wanted him—and here the danger was grave indeed. Just as soon as his chief discovered that the notes which he had brought were false, he would set out in pursuit of him, and Sherwood was quite aware that the peril from this quarter might be greater than from any other. He knew also that he could scarcely hope to avoid detection by his former leader for much longer than the following morning when the notes would most certainly be proved to be false. Sherwood felt a momentary sense of pity for the man he had known as the Dude: but his ruthless action had been necessary unless the chief were to know of his perfidy that very night.

“On the whole, young man,” said Sherwood to himself. “I rather think a change of personality would not be a bad idea. Ben Sherwood is wanted by too many people. Ben Sherwood had better disappear off the face of the earth, but I think he might make his last appearance at old man Vickers’ and see what these pearls will fetch. Vickers knows Ben Sherwood, he’ll deal with him. Yes. I think so. After that Mr. Sherwood had better cease to be.”

His decision made, Sherwood rose to his feet and went off in the direction of the receiver's house. It was a long walk but the man did the distance on his feet; he had no desire to hire a taxi or to use any other means of transport which later might identify him with a visit to Vickers. The less that was known of his movements that night the better it would be for him. Rather tired, nearly an hour later, Sherwood found himself in the street which harboured the notorious Mr. Vickers. It was very late but he knew that the old man would be in; this was the time at which Vickers usually transacted his business, for it was just such an hour that his customers were apt to prefer when favouring him with a visit.

A thin shaft of light could be seen through the shutters of one of his windows. Sherwood knew this to be a signal that the receiver was in and ready to do any business that might occur. He approached the window softly, tapped twice, and quickly returned to the door. For a moment or two he waited, then he heard the sound of bolts being withdrawn and the door was opened an inch or two. Sherwood turned his face towards the crack; he knew that the old man would not let him enter unless he saw his features first. As soon as he did so the door was opened just wide enough for him to pass through and immediately closed behind him. Sherwood was in darkness.

"This way, Ben," said a voice which he recognised as that of Vickers, and as his eyes

became accustomed to the dimness of the passage he saw the huddled shape of the old man leading the way to the door of his study. This he opened, allowing light to penetrate into the passage. Sherwood stepped through into the study and Vickers shut and locked the door behind him.

"Good evening, Ben." The old man spoke in his wheezing voice. "Glad to see you."

He walked over to a cupboard and brought out a bottle and two glasses. "Help yourself."

Sherwood needed no second invitation. He was cold and his nerves had been through a good deal that evening; the spirit was welcome and did much to restore his usual equanimity.

"Evening, Vickers. Haven't seen you for some time."

"No." Vickers smiled. "Heard you'd gone on the stage. Gone straight."

Sherwood laughed.

"I did for a bit. The stage, I mean. But not straight stuff . . . light comedy." He grinned. "It wasn't good enough. I found that the louts who call themselves managers failed to appreciate the remarkable histrionic talents which I have inherited from my poor dear mother. They were also lamentably lacking in easily removable property. But there's a little thing that I have got here, Vickers, which I thought might interest you."

"Oh," said the old man, his eyes shining suddenly with a gleam of anticipation. "And what is it?"

Without a word Sherwood pulled from his pocket the necklace which he had found in McGrory's mattress. He threw it on to the table in front of the astonished eyes of the old receiver.

"What d'you make of that?" he asked.

Very quietly Vickers took up the necklace and let it run through his fingers, glancing at it appraisingly. He remained thus for some moments, evidently engrossed with the pearls which lay shining so brilliantly, opalescent and milky, a faint tinge of rose seeming to glow in their creamy depths. Suddenly he looked up and met Ben Sherwood's eyes.

"Where did you get these?" he asked sharply.

"Found them in my pocket," said Sherwood, shortly. "What's the matter with you, Vickers? Don't remember that question being usual."

"There isn't much the matter with me," said Vickers. "That's why I put that question to you, young man. I'm not such an old fool as you'd think." He paused for a moment and seemed to be scrutinising Sherwood, who shifted uncomfortably under the piercing gaze of those fierce, grey eyes beneath the bushy eyebrows. "This necklace has been offered to me before and I wouldn't take it, for a good reason. It was not offered to me by you."

"True, O Sage," said Sherwood, lightly, "but I really can't be responsible for whoever offered it to you before. I'm much more concerned

with why you wouldn't have it. Those pearls are beautiful."

For a moment Vickers looked down once more at the necklace, at the exquisite sheen on each precious bead, then he glanced sharply at Sherwood.

"I am going to tell you something, Ben. These pearls were offered to me over three months ago by a man who wouldn't tell me how he had got them. That, as I see you are about to suggest, is not really surprising. You also refused to give me any idea just a minute or two ago. Well, I'll tell you why I wouldn't have them then and why I won't touch them now. Those pearls are tainted."

"Tainted?" Sherwood laughed gaily. "Well, I must say that's a good one, old man Vickers. What the devil d'you mean? Isn't everything that's brought in here tainted with dishonesty? Are you becoming such a maudlin old fool that you are going straight for coppers instead of crooked for sovereigns?"

Vickers held up his hand, an imperious gesture, and Sherwood stopped taunting abruptly.

"Tainted with blood."

For a long moment there was silence. Sherwood was looking at the old man intently, trying to understand what lay behind these words; then suddenly Vickers started to speak. After the first few words the listener realised that he was talking more to himself than to his visitor.

"I've never had anything to do with a piece

of jewellery over which murder has been committed. I've never done anything of that sort and I never will. It's very obvious that to get mixed up with that kind of thing is to ask for trouble. Pilcher did so and Pilcher got a long term in gaol. Johnson did so and Johnson was shot in his own sitting-room by his client. No." Vickers shivered. "I won't have anything to do with it." He looked up suddenly as if again aware of the presence of Sherwood. "No good, Ben, I'm not asking you now how you got hold of this thing but I'll give you just one piece of advice. There isn't a man in London who will touch that necklace. It's too well known, you see. It's worth a lot, you know that as well as I do, but to you or any of your lot who may come and try to get money on it, it's worth precisely nothing; and I warn you of something else, something which it will be just as well for you to remember. If you're too free with the sight of this necklace, if you let too many people see it, somebody's going to give you away, and if they do you've got to explain why you're in possession of a necklace which was stolen by an armed man who shot the butler of the house on his way out." He paused and looked steadily at Sherwood. "And do you know who brought me this necklace not so very long ago?"

"Yes," said Sherwood lightly, not at all impressed by the old man's seriousness. "McGrory."

Vickers nodded.

"It was McGrory and I told him the same as I've told you. I suppose you've taken advantage of McGrory's absence from home," Vickers' face suddenly contracted into a grin, ugly to see, "to have a look round his place. I believe I'm telling you a secret, Ben, but there, I've always liked your young face. I believe I'm telling you a secret when I say that this little piece of jewellery is the thing which frightened McGrory off anything but hard cash, and when I saw in the evening paper to-day that McGrory had been landed, I fell to wondering whether the police would connect him up with the little effort of getting this necklace. If they do, well . . . McGrory will be hard put to get away with it."

Sherwood was listening intently. Here was news indeed. His fertile brain was considering the possibility of getting McGrory permanently out of his way by means of the necklace in Vickers' old hand. He held out his own for it and the other gave it to him without a word. Sherwood slipped it into his pocket.

"Thank you, Vickers. Thank you for the information. I've been visiting McGrory's place, yes, but I didn't know the history of this little necklace. I'll remember what you say and keep it pretty close."

Sherwood rose to his feet and Vickers did likewise.

"Nothing else?"

Sherwood laughed.

"No, I think your premise that this necklace

was the means of turning McGrory from anything but hard cash must have been correct, old man. Anyway there was nothing else that I could find."

"Except hard cash," said Vickers.

Sherwood laughed again.

"I wasn't very lucky. He must have got it somewhere else. Perhaps he's got a banking account under some other name."

He was certainly not going to let Vickers know that his haul had been fairly considerable, nor was he going to mention anything about the bulging packet of bank notes in his inside pocket.

"Well, I'll say good-night, Vickers."

"You won't have another drink before you go, Ben?"

"No thanks, old man. Rather think I'll be wandering homewards."

Vickers nodded his head. He led the way to the door, opened it and started to walk down the dark passage towards the front door of the house. Ben Sherwood followed him; as he did so his hand slipped into his pocket and his fingers closed on the hilt of his knife.

I CAN seldom remember having been so annoyed, so irritated as I was this morning. It is never a pleasant thing to discover unfaithfulness and disloyalty in one who has been trusted. In this particular instance it is more than ever intolerable, for the very good reason that I have been made to look rather a fool in the eyes of my men. A leader should never appear stupid to those whom he commands. No matter how unavoidable it may have been the fact is remembered against him, and not only remembered but actually may become an obsession in the minds of those from whom he demands instant obedience. In spite of the fallibility of most, if not all, human beings—maybe, indeed, because of it—man exacts that those who are in charge of his destiny should be infallible; a failure rankles until it sometimes becomes an open sore and leads to rebellion.

Perhaps I am becoming fanciful, perhaps I have been long enough in the business and should retire. Goodness knows, I can well afford to, but there is a great attraction to remaining in harness and I should loathe to give up yet. It is still early to be able to gauge properly the effect which this, my first failure, will have on those who have remained loyal to me. I am hoping and trusting that it will not be serious, but the

fact remains that I have been made to look a fool by a man in whom I had implicit faith, and whom I shall no longer protect by the numeral Two but divulge his proper name, which is—Ben Sherwood. It is all the more annoying because Sherwood was a particularly useful member of my band. At one time or other in the dim past I understand that he was an actor; quite recently, I believe, he spent a few months on the stage again, after which he became one of my little gang. His stage training has been of the utmost use to him and of infinite value to me, because more than most actors he is able to transform himself, with a few deft touches and a slight alteration in clothing, into the semblance of almost anybody whom I choose to name. He is, however, not satisfied by assuming merely the outward appearance of the person whom he is portraying; he goes further. He is possessed of the most amazing power of mimicry, with the result that he can talk in exactly the same tone of voice, using the identical intonation and even phraseology, of the person whom he wishes to depict, and like a great artist he does not require a long time in which to study his subject. He can achieve a remarkable effect after spending only an hour or two observing the one whom he intends to impersonate. These great powers have been of considerable use to me in the past, even so recently as yesterday, when I secured—or rather, thought I had secured—a very easy two thousand.

Late last night Sherwood, who had taken the place of Thompson and obtained the money from

the police inspector on the train, came to me and handed over the spoils. I knew the money to be in notes, and it was notes for two thousand pounds that he placed on my desk. I suppose in one way I must call myself lucky for having so soon discovered the fraud. Three was with me last night when Sherwood came in, and it so happened, that being short of money Three asked for an advance on his monthly share-out. I gave him four five pound notes from the bundle which had been handed to me by Sherwood, and thought no more about it until early this morning when, before I had breakfasted, I received an urgent communication from Three stating that he desired speech with me. I instructed him to come along, and as soon as he had arrived one glance at his face made me realise immediately that something was wrong. He gave me a quick but graphic account of what had happened to him on the previous evening.

Apparently one of his reasons for requiring the money had been that he wished to take a friend out for an evening's entertainment. He met her by appointment—I need not say that she was a girl friend—and he very soon had to pay out one of the five-pound notes in order to settle a bill for some supper they had consumed. Three said that it never occurred to him to worry about the money : he just sat there waiting for his change. It did not arrive, however ; instead the manager came to his table. He was polite, but firm ; he informed Three that the note which he had proffered was not genuine. In great astonishment Three asked

to see the note, and upon it being produced it was only too obvious to his expert eye that the manager was entirely correct.

Three realised that he was in a very serious position, for the other notes in his pocket had come from the same bundle, and were undoubtedly just as false as the one which had been refused. It was lucky for him, therefore, that his lady friend had a certain amount of cash in her bag with which she paid for the supper. Three passed off the incident with the manager by expressing his regret for the mistake and putting up a good pretence of being thoroughly annoyed at having had a bad five-pound note passed on him. He left the place with the manager's condolences.

As soon as I had received this information I took the bundle of notes which Sherwood had handed to me yesterday evening, and subjected them to a close scrutiny. There is no question at all but that every one of these notes is a fake, and what is more, not even a good fake, but a clumsy imitation of the genuine article. I had never even glanced at them last night ; it had not occurred to me for an instant that Sherwood was dishonest or disloyal, but as soon as I realised the enormity of his offence I dismissed Three so that I could think the matter over. The more I considered it the less I liked it. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind whatsoever that Ben Sherwood has broken his oath of allegiance to me and has deserted both me and my band. Far worse than that, however, he has deliberately got away with two thousand pounds, of which only a fifth share

is rightly his. He has been guilty of the worst offence, bar one (I refer, of course, to informing the police of our plans) which it is possible for him to commit.

I determined, nevertheless, to give the man a chance of explaining himself, and therefore rang him up at the address which I know will always find him. He was not there ; not only was he not there but he had not been there since the time I had seen him last night. Sherwood doesn't do that sort of thing if he intends to remain with me, for one of my rules is that each of my band must be easily accessible in the event of my suddenly requiring his services. It is quite obvious that Ben Sherwood has quitted my band and, moreover, cheated his colleagues and myself of a large sum of money.

The moment I had made up my mind as to this fact I decided that the only thing to do was to make a perfectly clean breast of the whole affair to my gang. I summoned them all here to me and we have discussed the matter at length, during which I became aware of a thing which I had never previously suspected—that Sherwood was in no way popular with the rest of them. He was tolerated on account of his great gifts of impersonation and his undoubted use to us, but the others did not like him. This has surprised me, for although I must admit that I am hankering after his blood at the moment and that I dislike him as much, I think, as I dislike any man, not excepting that interfering fellow Superintendent Tudor of Scotland Yard, yet before his disloyalty his manner

rather charmed me. He was more educated than the rest ; he knew how to comport himself in decent society, and he was, frankly, a cultured person. This fact makes his action all the more astonishing.

However, Sherwood has sealed his fate. From now on every single unit of my band is out to get him, and there will be no mercy when he is caught ; he will be made to suffer a punishment to fit his crime—and I hope he will enjoy it. His eventual discovery is inevitable : I am setting in motion all the forces known only to me, in order to find out his whereabouts.

At the conclusion of our meeting Five asked permission to remain and talk to me privately, to which I readily acceded. He then enquired whether our future activities were to be entirely devoted to our revenge on Sherwood. I immediately enlightened him on this point. We were to keep a weather eye open for Ben Sherwood, but since his ultimate capture was a certainty, there was no need for us to lose the chance of any useful and profitable little piece of business which might come our way in the meantime. Five then informed me that he had obtained definite information about a raid which the Weighting Gang proposed to accomplish.

A word here to explain this rather clever band of men will not be out of place. They are called the Weighting Gang partly because they are all waiters, and partly because their leader is a man who goes by the name of Weight. This is obviously not his name, it is far too apt to be genuine, as

he is a big man, a very big man indeed. He, himself, rather like me, scarcely ever takes a personal part in the activities of his gang. He is the man behind the scenes, the brain that evolves the plan of action. His men are employed as waiters in the various restaurants round London, and when not actually engaged on a coup such as evidently is contemplated now, they make their livelihood honestly to a certain extent, but also dishonestly by removing various choice articles of jewellery from those whom they serve. They are all, in fact, extremely dexterous with their fingers.

Five announced that a large ball is to be given at a private house in Park Lane to-night. He apologised exceedingly for giving me so little warning, but said he had only just come across his information. I waived the matter. I had twelve hours and four would have been enough for me to make my arrangements. Anyway Five is quite definite that Weight has so arranged matters that his waiters have all been engaged to act in their honest capacity at this ball. His interest had been attracted to it by the fact that the famous necklace known as "The Seventy Sapphires" was to be worn by the very stupid owner, stupid in view of the fact that she had advertised the matter in the papers, and had actually allowed a photograph of herself, bedecked in the necklace and costume which she proposed wearing at the ball, to appear in one of the Society weeklies. "The Seventy Sapphires" is probably the most famous necklace in the world, and one of the most valuable. It is usually kept by the family who owns it in the vaults of the

bank which has the support of their custom, and is only brought out on special occasions. This was to be the first public appearance of "The Seventy Sapphires" round the slender neck of its present owner, and if Weight had anything to do with it he proposed to make it the last. It seemed to me that I must collaborate with the idea, removing, however, from Weight the pleasure of even temporary ownership.

I spent some time pondering over the matter after I had dismissed Five. The more I thought of it the more did it appear to me a very suitable ending to my career, if an ending I must make. The defection of Two might spread. At any rate I had a nasty taste in my mouth which had come about through his disloyalty, a feeling that I could not trust any of the others. Two had been the nearest to me of all of them, and his treachery hurt me as much because I had lost the closest thing to a friend which I can ever possess in this profession of mine, as the fact that I had lost probably the most useful member of my band. When I sat there and thought of him, this fellow Ben Sherwood, a bitter feeling of hatred almost overwhelmed me. I had never felt anything like it before and I realised how much my pride had been affected. I determined I would waste no time getting hold of him and inflicting as severe and painful a punishment as I could devise. I rang up various acquaintances on the spot, and set the wheels in motion.

Thereupon I returned to my task and considered the plan of action prepared by Weight, a copy

of which had been procured by Five and now lay before me. I could not deny that the idea was ingenious, that old Weight knew his business. His waiter followers would be at their respective posts at the appointed time. At this hour, previously fixed upon, every light in the building would be extinguished; an easy matter, according to Weight's note, since there was one main fuse with the position of which he was already acquainted. To mend this would take a few minutes, by which time the greatest expert in sleight-of-hand among his followers would have whisked the necklace off the unsuspecting hostess and passed it to a confederate on the balcony of the house. It would then take an over-air route, being thrown by the man who had received it to an accomplice dressed as a chauffeur. This man was to mingle with the other chauffeurs in Park Lane far away from the house in question, then to separate from them and be in readiness with his car near the balcony at the appointed time. The engine was to be running and immediately the necklace reached him he was to make off in the car with all possible speed.

I leant back in my chair. I shook with laughter.

It was with feelings bordering on the most intense excitement that Detective Inspector Lynton hastened back to Scotland Yard in compliance with Hurst's message. He had caught an early train up from Brighton that morning, had chartered a taxi at Victoria and was now being driven swiftly towards the Yard, his mind full of queries as to the reason for his presence being so urgently requested. Had something happened about which he knew nothing? Had this clever impostor been tracked, possibly actually caught! Perhaps McGrory, who had not failed to profit by his opportunity—an empty cell had brightened Lynton's heart that morning—was already hot on the trail, his thirst for vengeance proving a strong ally in his quest. Had his two shadowers, the policemen detailed off to keep him under surveillance, been in communication with the Yard?

Lynton's breath came faster at the thought; the arrest of this criminal meant so much, so very much to him . . . his whole future, in fact. Should he fail this time his career would be ruined. Once removed from the special branch his chances of ever again obtaining promotion were slender; the remainder of his service would be not only inglorious and

humdrum but full of bitter humiliation and self-reproach.

There was, therefore, an eager gleam in his eyes, when Lynton jumped out of the cab, paid off the driver, and hastening in, went to Inspector Hurst's private office. He opened the door quickly and walked in. Hurst was seated at his desk, writing what appeared to be a report. At the young man's brisk entrance he looked up sharply and recognising his visitor greeted him with warmth.

“Well, Lynton, I must say you haven't wasted much time getting up here. Catch the 8.5 ?”

Lynton nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “couldn't get here fast enough. I ought to have stayed down in Brighton really as witness in the McGrory affair, but I got out of that as your message seemed so urgent. What's up, Hurst? No news from McGrory yet, is there?”

“McGrory?” Hurst looked at the younger man in surprise. “Why, he's locked up in Brighton, isn't he? You got him too, didn't you?”

“I did,” said Lynton, impatiently, “but he escaped last night.”

“Good God!” cried Hurst, “that's a rotten show! There'll be trouble about that.”

“Well . . . no,” said Lynton, with a smile, “fact is, he was allowed to escape—he's being shadowed, you see—so that he'll act as blood-hound in scenting the fellow who imper-

sonated Thompson. You know all about that, of course ? ”

“ Yes,” agreed Hurst, “ and I’ve got news for you, Lynton. I think we’re on his trail.”

A ray of exultation lit up the other’s face ; he was gazing fixedly at Hurst, his whole attitude tense with excitement.

“ What’s happened ? ” he asked.

Hurst looked at him sympathetically.

“ Very late last night a young girl came and asked to see you.”

He paused and Lynton sat upright in surprise.

“ Whatever for ? ”

“ Apparently she knew about your part in the McGrory blackmail affair—this was the girl in question, who got young Thompson involved.”

“ Well, I’m . . . ”

Lynton’s amazement was too great to be put into words ; he leant forward eagerly as Hurst continued :

“ When informed that you weren’t available she agreed that I should act as your proxy, and I must confess I was never more staggered in all my life as at her tale. To cut it short she told me about her part in the affair, that she’d been the tool of a clever scoundrel, the man who got the two thousand—Ben Sherwood’s his name. It appears he forced her to show him McGrory’s lair and was seizing all that gentleman’s ill-gotten wealth, hidden in his mattress, when in walks the Dude . . . McGrory’s latest recruit, you know. Sherwood

knives him, and the girl, panic-stricken, dashes away, comes to us and gets us to go back with her where we find the body. Quite an exciting evening, in fact."

He paused, and Lynton looked at him anxiously.

"And the man—Sherwood?"

"I'm afraid he got away. But I don't think there'll be much difficulty in getting him now."

"Where's the girl?" broke in Lynton, eagerly. "Is she here?"

"Yes," said Hurst, rising. "I'll send her up to you now if you like."

"Thank you," said Lynton, and without further ado Hurst walked to the door; but with his hand on the latch he turned, and said:

"Oh, by the way, her name's Estelle Desmond—or so she says."

Lynton sat motionless staring at the door, all his thoughts concentrated on the strange girl who had so unexpectedly come to his aid. In his wildest dreams he would never have looked for help from that quarter.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and without waiting for an answer a young girl entered.

The moment his eyes fell on her Lynton jumped up; his manner changed subtly from that of the brisk police officer to something different. This was not at all the sort of girl he had expected to meet; not the type usually associated with blackmailing efforts. He shook hands with her and after motioning her to a

seat, sat down again and remained staring at her fixedly in irresistible admiration; she was, he had to admit, the most attractive girl he had seen for many a day.

Refreshed by her night's sleep, hope once more dawning in her lovely dark eyes, Estelle was indeed a sight to gladden the heart of the most mournful. She was hatless and her black hair, curling round her face, served to enhance the startling whiteness of her skin and the delicate rose of her complexion. A wide ruby mouth, allowing glimpses of even teeth; a long aquiline nose and determined chin, completed a face whose beauty and character filled the young Inspector almost with wonder. She was dressed in a navy-blue tailor-made costume which fitted her dainty figure to perfection. Lynton gazed at her silently for a moment, until a slight blush mounting Estelle's cheek made him suddenly realise his unconscious rudeness. He smiled at her pleasantly and said:

"Well, Miss Desmond, I think I owe you a debt of gratitude, don't I?"

Estelle's eyes widened in surprise; this was hardly the way in which she had expected to be greeted.

"I . . . I don't quite understand," she murmured.

"For coming forward with the information," said Lynton genially. "It's going to be a tremendous help to me, Miss Desmond. As you know, the fellow fooled me also."

"Yes," said Estelle.

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"You . . . you know all about me, I suppose? About . . . about my part in Thompson's affair?" she asked quietly.

Lynton looked at her curiously.

"Only the bare facts, Miss Desmond. I should be immensely obliged if you would let me know the details, how you got mixed up in it. You see, you don't appear to be at all the kind of person to do these things."

* Estelle glanced at him gratefully, flushed a little and for a moment tears filled her eyes. Then she said slowly:

"No, I'm . . . not really that sort at all, Inspector Lynton. Only I was a fool . . . such a fool. Would you . . . could I explain how it all happened?"

"Please do," said Lynton. "I'm sure there must be a good reason."

He smiled and Estelle flashed him a look eloquent of thanks.

"First of all, I'm afraid I'll have to tell you something about myself, Inspector. My father died when I was very young—three or four, I think—and my mother two years ago. Since she died I've supported myself by taking small parts on the stage. I've always been frightfully keen on acting and I really haven't done so badly, but . . . not well. It's very difficult, you see, for anyone unknown to be given decent parts. Anyway I was managing to scrape along somehow hoping one day to get my chance

—when I met Ben Sherwood. That was three months ago. He joined the company in which I was acting—joined as juvenile lead. And he was really astoundingly good. It was a repertory company and there was every scope for his talents. He was getting quite good pay, too, so I was enormously surprised and flattered when he came up to me one day and said he had a scheme to propose. He told me he had written a play and wanted me to be the leading lady. At the time I was feeling very depressed as I had been given only frightfully small parts for weeks. Imagine my joy at being singled out by one of the most prominent members of the company. I couldn't understand why he hadn't spoken of it to the leading lady or somebody of that sort, but . . . well, he can be extremely charming, Inspector Lynton, and after he had said all sorts of pretty things about me having the most talent of the lot, and things like that—all of which I swallowed like the conceited fool I was—I agreed to do all I could to help. He got me to leave that company, and only when I had done so told me that he must get two thousand pounds before he could produce the play. I can't think how I could have been so blind, but anyway bit by bit he got me to think that our one hope lay in getting this money. 'We must get it somehow,' he kept on saying, 'even if we have to beg, borrow or steal. It's all in the cause of art and we can always pay it back.'

"At last the idea became a sort of obsession

with me. You see I was in rather a precarious position now, being without a job and living on my savings—which weren't much. Well when I got down to the last few pounds I became desperate. Then Sherwood came and told me that he had joined a gang and was going to try to get the money that way—walk off with their spoils, and he proposed that as we were partners I should do likewise. I was at my wits' end by then . . . and I agreed. I'm not trying to excuse myself in the least, I know how abominable it was, but . . . I made up my mind to pay it back some time and tried to think that it wasn't so dishonest, robbing thieves. Anyway I joined McGrory's gang, but I couldn't stick it for long." A look of horror overshadowed her face. "I gave it up and then fell in with Thompson. At first I hadn't the slightest thought of using him—I do hope you will believe that." She looked up at Lynton entreatingly, and he replied, quietly.

"Yes, yes, I do, of course, Miss Desmond."

"Well, one day he asked me to marry him—and then the idea came to me. I got him to write to me asking me again—convinced him that I wasn't the kind of person to marry . . . and then used the letter."

She stopped speaking abruptly, and for a while Lynton made no comment, then suddenly jumping up he walked to the window. He stared out unseeingly, his mind full of rage and fury against the insufferable scoundrel who had been the means of bringing this charming

and unusually attractive girl into such a sordid affair. He turned round at last and faced her, a look of pity and sympathy on his face.

"Well, Miss Desmond," he said, "I can see you've been more sinned against than sinning. I'm exceedingly sorry for you, more than I can say, but at any rate you've behaved very wisely in coming to us now. You can be of the utmost service to me—if you will?"

He paused for a moment. The girl suddenly spoke impulsively:

"Oh, yes, yes. I'll do anything."

"Thank you." Lynton smiled, but then went on in a graver tone. "I'll do what I can for you, Miss Desmond. You can rely upon that, but I'm afraid I can't get you off all the consequences of that blackmail business—they're very down on that sort of thing, you know—but anyway I'll do all I can."

The girl thanked him warmly and rose to go. Lynton shook hands with her once more and watched her depart in the company of a police officer, noting with pleasure the grace of her movements; when the door had shut behind her he sat down once more and an angry scowl darkened his features. He was thinking of Sherwood, longing to get at him, and feeling almost thankful that when caught he could be tried on the capital charge.

"Scum like that," growled Lynton to himself, "isn't fit to live."

Suddenly another thought struck him. Had it not been for this girl's prompt action in giving

them the information immediately, the murder would probably have been put down to McGrory's account. It was extremely lucky for that gentleman that Hurst had been on the spot within half an hour after the crime had been committed ; about the time when McGrory was making a speedy get-away from the gaol in Brighton. There could be, therefore, no possibility whatever of his having been connected with it.

At this moment Lynton's thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of Inspector Hurst.

"Well, what did you think of her?" he asked, a sly grin on his usually rather impassive face.

Lynton flushed slightly and replied shortly :

"I think that Miss Desmond is a most unfortunate young lady, and I'm going to help her all I can."

"Yes." Hurst spoke gravely. "I'm inclined to agree with you, Lynton. This Sherwood, if and when he is caught, will have a long account to settle."

"Tell me," broke in Lynton, "didn't you find any clue whatever at McGrory's place, nothing which would help us to get on to this fellow at all?"

"Not a thing," said Hurst, emphatically. "I examined the whole place thoroughly and couldn't find a thing, not the slightest fingerprint, nothing which could possibly help us."

"Dash," said Lynton, thoughtfully, "that's a great pity. And the doctor. What did he say? I suppose you got him to examine the body immediately, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied Hurst, "sent him there directly I returned to the Yard. He said that the man couldn't have been dead much more than half an hour."

"Good God!" exclaimed Lynton, "this man must be an experienced johnnie and no mistake. It isn't an easy matter to cover up your tracks in half an hour. This fellow is no amateur, that's obvious. Years of experience, I should say. I'm afraid it's going to be difficult to get him, Hurst, in spite of Miss Desmond's information."

"Oh, by the way," asked Hurst, "what's to be done with her? We can't keep her in custody without arresting her."

Lynton frowned.

"I don't want to do that," he said, slowly, "she might be very useful to us, you see. She can recognise this fellow, while none of us can. I've only seen him as Thompson and that's going to be more of a hindrance than a help, I should think."

"Well, what do you suggest?" asked Hurst.

Lynton looked perplexed.

"I'll have to think of something. I really don't quite know for the moment."

He remained silent for a while, his brows furrowed in deep thought.

"What about Sherwood's stage career?" suddenly broke in Hurst. "If Miss Desmond knows what plays he was in perhaps we could get hold of some stage photographs of him."

"Why, of course," cried Lynton, excitedly.

"Good man! We'll have her up here immediately and ask her."

Hurst rang the bell, which was answered at once by a uniformed policeman.

"Ask Miss Desmond if she would be kind enough to come up here," instructed Hurst. "Inspector Lynton and I have something important to ask her."

"Very good, sir."

In a few moments the girl appeared, a rather anxious look on her face, which vanished immediately at Lynton's first question.

"Can you remember, Miss Desmond, in what plays Sherwood acted, the parts he took and whether he had any photographs taken of himself?"

Estelle did not answer for a while; she was thinking deeply, but in a few moments she gave them a list of eight or nine plays in which, she said, Sherwood had played the part of juvenile lead.

"And you think photographs were taken, for advertising purposes?" asked Hurst.

"Yes," replied Estelle, with certainty. "He was terribly keen on having his photograph taken. He had a new one of himself in each part—he is rather good-looking and very conceited. It became rather a joke in the company, his photograph craze."

"Splendid!" cried Lynton. "And what's the address of the manager, Miss Desmond?"

As she gave it, Lynton noted it down carefully in his pocket-book.

"Right. Well, I won't trouble you any more for the moment, Miss Desmond. Thank you very much indeed."

After she had gone Lynton wrote a note to the manager of the Folly Theatre, asking if he would be good enough immediately to bring along to Scotland Yard any photographs he might have of Mr. Ben Sherwood who had acted as juvenile lead in the plays mentioned.

Hurst, in the meantime, had given instructions for a messenger to be sent to him at once, and directly Lynton had finished addressing the envelope, he handed it to the man, bidding him go post haste to the theatre.

The half hour that ensued before the manager arrived, seemed twice as long to the two Inspectors; so much might depend on whether such photographs were available. It was, therefore, with a definite feeling of relief that they were informed that a gentleman had arrived from the Folly Theatre and wished to see Inspector Lynton.

"Show him up," said Lynton to the policeman who had brought the message, and in a few moments a short, dapper, rather rotund little man entered the room. He was carrying a parcel under his arm, which he handed to Lynton after the preliminary greetings.

"All Sherwood's photographs are in there, sir. About eight, I think. But is . . . is he . . ."

"Never mind all that," broke in Hurst, rather curtly. "I'm sorry, but that's not your

affair, Mr. Holt. We want the photographs for purposes of identification, that's all."

Somewhat crestfallen at the rebuff the little man shuffled his feet uneasily and glanced deprecatingly at Lynton, who smiled at him pleasantly.

"Thanks very much for bringing them along, Mr. Holt; I hope they'll be of use to us."

While speaking he had been swiftly removing the string and paper from the parcel, and he now stared eagerly at the contents. There were eight rather large photographs of a good-looking, smiling, young man, dressed for the most part in ordinary lounge suits. In one or two, however, he was in costume. Lynton handed some to Inspector Hurst, then turned again and examined them with intense interest, but try as he would he could see not the slightest resemblance in any of them to the youth whom he had believed to be Mr. Thompson. He looked up at last at Holt.

"Thank you," he said, "perhaps you could leave these with us for a while." Then turning to Hurst. "We'd better have Miss Desmond up again to see them."

A look of interest lit up the face of little Mr. Holt. He stared incredulously at the young Inspector.

"Er . . . did you say Miss Desmond, sir?" He spoke excitedly. "Not Miss Estelle Desmond?"

"Yes," said Lynton, quickly. "You know her, of course."

"Well, what an extraordinary thing!" The fat little man beamed. "I've been trying to get in touch with her for a week. I've got a good part for her. One of my company has fallen ill, will never be strong enough to act any more, and I think the part would just suit Miss Desmond. Give her a chance to show what she can do. Very talented little lady, I think. Is she here? Could I see her?"

"Just a moment," said Lynton. "Do I understand that you wish to see Miss Desmond in order to offer her this part?"

"Yes," said Holt, quickly, "I . . ."

"All right," interrupted Lynton, "but there's just one thing. I'm afraid we want her services for a little while on this job, but I suppose you can wait for her a bit?"

He looked inquiringly at Holt, who nodded his head vigorously.

"Well, I want to see her first about this. Shan't be long, and then you can talk to her as much as you like. Do you mind going back to the waiting room a moment, until we've seen her?"

With a delighted smile on his chubby face Mr. Holt hastened from the room, and a moment later Lynton turned to Hurst.

"We've got to do what we can to help this girl, old man," he said, seriously. "Mustn't let Holt know anything about her blackmailing effort. We'll get Miss Desmond up here and give her the tip to say nothing."

Hurst nodded his head in agreement, rang

the bell and gave instructions for Estelle to be sent for.

A moment later she entered and in a few words Lynton explained the situation. The change in the girl's face was startling. A look of joy shone in her eyes and she gazed at Lynton with an expression almost of worshipping gratitude.

"I'll leave you in here," he said quickly, and signing to Hurst to follow him, he walked rapidly from the room.

Twenty minutes later a transformed Estelle was carefully examining the photographs Holt had brought, in an effort to select the best one for the purpose of enlargement. This would then be circulated throughout the force. At last she handed one over to Hurst, who hastened away in order to give the necessary instructions, and turning to Lynton she said :

"I'm afraid this isn't going to be of much use to you, Inspector Lynton."

"Why not ?" he replied, in surprise.

"Well, he's such an absolute past master in the art of make-up," said the girl quickly. "You remember how he took you in, and I'm quite sure he isn't either Thompson or Sherwood at the present moment."

"True," agreed Lynton, "but anyway it may help. One never knows."

For a few moments they did not speak: Lynton was evidently occupied with his thoughts. At last he turned to the girl, a pleasant smile lighting up his face, and said :

“Er . . . Miss Desmond, I’ve been thinking over what to do with you. I can’t let you go yet, you know. I suggest you come with me to see the housekeeper at my lodgings. She’s a very nice woman and will be able to fix you up, I’m sure. There’s only one thing you must promise me—” his tone was very serious and Estelle looked at him inquiringly—“that you will not leave your rooms until I give you permission, and never unless you go either with me or with someone I may send for you. Is that clear?”

The girl assented willingly.

“There’s another thing, Miss Desmond,” went on Lynton slowly, “I want to ask you to help me in every possible way to get on the track of this scoundrel, and I promise you I’ll do everything I can to get you off about the blackmail business. The sooner we get hold of this fellow, the sooner you’ll be free to take up this job. Is it a bargain?”

Estelle hastened to assure him of her willingness to do all in her power to assist, hope brightening up her lovely eyes and lending an added charm to her beauty. Lynton gazed at her admiringly, and then telling her to get her things, he accompanied her from the room. A few minutes later they were driving in a fast car towards the Inspector’s lodgings, a transformed Estelle chattering gaily on the way about Mr. Holt’s marvellous offer.

Two gentle taps came at old man Vickers' window. The night was a foul one : wind and rain swept the streets and dark, threatening clouds overshadowed the sky.

A stooping figure rose from the chair beside the fire, shuffled across the room through the hall, and then releasing the bolts, but keeping the chain on the latch, opened the door only an inch or two. A quick scrutiny and he was apparently satisfied ; quickly slipping the chain from its place he opened the door just wide enough to allow his visitor to enter, and then shut and bolted it as before.

" Evening, old man," said his visitor.

" Evening, Weight," replied the frail voice.

With no further word the stooping figure led the way back to the comfort of the warm room which he had just left and shut the door. He then shuffled over to the cupboard, withdrew a bottle and two glasses which he placed on the table within easy reach of his visitor, motioned to him in unspoken invitation, and sat down again in his chair.

" Thanks," said Weight.

He was a big man, this visitor, but he had not that sort of size which betokens great strength. He was fat and flabby rather than muscular,

and his clothes did much to enhance this impression, for they hung loosely upon him. One specially notable feature about the man was the immense size of his feet, which became more than ever obvious now that he leant back in his chair, with legs crossed, a drink in his hand—the picture of lazy comfort.

“Well?” asked his host.

For a few moments Weight did not reply, then he looked up and glanced at the huddled figure before him; a watcher could have seen a gleam shining in his eyes.

“Ever heard of ‘The Seventy Sapphires’?”

“A necklace,” replied the other promptly, “of fabulous value.”

“Easily disposed of, too,” said Weight.

The old man did not reply for a moment, then beneath the bushy eyebrows, his keen glance rested on his bulky visitor.

“You think so, do you?”

“Yes,” said Weight with conviction. “Ought to be worth a good deal to you, old man Vickers. Taken from the setting and the stones skilfully cut to a different shape by the people who work for you, you ought to be able to retire and more on what you will make out of that necklace when I’ve delivered it to you.”

“And when,” said the other, “will that be?”

Weight looked at his watch.

“All going well,” he said, “within two hours.”

There was a long pause. Weight was carefully scrutinising his host in an attempt to find

out what the other thought of this rather remarkable statement, but he obtained nothing from his examination of the impassive face and what little he could see of the man's eyes, shrouded by the enormous eyebrows. He shifted uneasily in his seat.

"What's that necklace worth to me from you, Vickers?"

There came no reply. The old man seemed engrossed in thought. For some seconds Weight mastered his impatience, then he burst out:

"Hurry up. Give it a name. If I'm going to do what I've just said, hand that necklace over to you to-night, I've got to get busy."

Then, quietly, the voice of the old man spoke in answer:

"From what I know of you, Weight, you don't usually get busy yourself in the jobs you arrange. Again from what I know of you I feel fairly certain that all your arrangements are already made, and they will go through with or without success according to the circumstances over which you have as much control as you can, but without any more personal interference on your part. You've asked me a question which requires a certain amount of answering. You've asked me what 'The Seventy Sapphires' are worth to you. I will tell you. Just four figures—one thousand pounds."

For a moment there was silence, then Weight threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Do you know what they're insured for, old man Vickers?"

"I do," replied the other suavely, "just a quarter of a million."

"And you have the nerve to offer me one thousand for a necklace which is world-famed and which is insured for a quarter of a million?"

"It is just for that reason," came the calm, even voice of the old man, "that I offer you one thousand and no more. That necklace, as you have justly said, is world-famed. That is regrettable; it means that I will have to exercise the greatest care in disposing of it, and it means that in order to run no risk of detection the stones will have to be very severely manhandled and will lose, in the process, almost all their value. I consider that one thousand is generous. It is an offer which I make to you because you are an old client of mine. I tell you straight that if somebody new, somebody I didn't know well came here and . . ."

"Stow it," Weight interrupted him angrily. "Don't spin that yarn to me. I know you well enough, old man Vickers. That fancy stuff doesn't pull any weight with me. You're always full of a hundred thousand reasons why anything that is offered you is practically valueless; but I know better, see? I know the true value of 'The Seventy Sapphires' and I tell you that a thousand is just a fraction of what I am going to get for it, and if you aren't the man who's going to buy it from me I shall be surprised but not disturbed. There are plenty of others who will give me my price."

There was a pause after he had finished

speaking. Weight was blustering. He shifted uneasily under the steady stare of the old man opposite.

"You are talking—unmitigated—tripe."

"Tripe, am I?" Weight leant forward, threateningly. "I'll have you know that I don't allow people to talk to me like that. I'll have you know . . ."

"Stop!" The old man's voice was imperious. "If you want to do business with me, Weight, you must understand quite clearly that this bullying attitude that you have taken up doesn't interest me in the least. I know you of old. I tell you quite frankly what is only the truth, that very few . . . er, well, gentlemen in my business," he smiled sarcastically, "would handle 'The Seventy Sapphires' at all. It is too dangerous. Quite apart from the danger, however, there are the cold facts which I have just attempted to explain to you, but to which I am afraid you were not disposed to listen. I trust you are more disposed now. These sapphires will lose a tremendous amount of their value. In the first place because they will have to be separated; in the second place because they will have to be mutilated. I might also point out that the insurance value set upon them is a fancy price, pure and simple. It so happens that the woman who owns them is able to pay the immense premium required, because she is very rich. You ought to know—after all, you are an old hand in jewellery—you ought to know that a quarter of a million is an absurd price

to set on the necklace. It is possible to put a price of that sort because the sapphires which make it up are so perfectly matched. The value of this matching will be entirely lost if I am to dispose of them separately, and I don't propose to dispose of them in any other way but separately. I am too old a hand to take any risks nowadays. I shall get, as the result of my labours, at the most fifteen hundred for the sapphires. I don't think that a shade of odds over thirty per cent. profit on the deal, considering that I have to take all the risk of disposal, is in any way too much to claim."

Weight leant forward. Gone was all his blustering attitude. Here was the keen business man about to transact a deal.

"Shall we cut out the nonsense?" he said, quietly. "You and I understand each other, old man Vickers. You're going to make about three thousand or more. I'll tell you what. I'll take two thousand for the necklace."

The other rose to his feet.

"I have made my final offer—one thousand. You are lucky to get as much. Take it or leave it."

He spoke with finality and shuffled over towards the door. Weight realised that he could not hope to force any better price from the old receiver. He rose also and followed him across the room.

"See here, old man. Let's split the difference. Call it fifteen hundred."

"One thousand."

The voice was obdurate.

"In cash?"

"In cash."

"Right," said Weight quietly. "I'll be back in under a couple of hours and I'll have 'The Seventy Sapphires' with me."

"Have you got them already?" suddenly asked the old man.

Weight smiled.

"Never you mind, old Vickers."

"I don't mind," came the cool reply. "Excepting that I'd rather not wait two hours at this time of night if I can have the necklace now and get the business done with."

Weight hesitated for a moment.

"No," he said. "I haven't got it yet. But I have no doubt that I shall have it. Don't you worry. I'll be back quite shortly. Have you the cash ready?"

"It will be ready for you."

The old man preceded his guest to the front door, drew back the bolts and let him out into the dark night.

"So long," said Weight.

A murmured answer came to him as he made off, remarkably silently for a man of his size.

The stooping figure returned to the arm-chair, but was scarcely seated again before there came two sharp taps on the window. He looked up quickly and stared at the shutters before making any movement, then apparently making up his mind, he rose to his feet and returned to the front door. Once again he went through the

procedure, and through the crack of the opening scanned his visitor. Then, this time with more alacrity than before, he let the chain fall and allowed a man to enter.

"Good evening, Mr. Vickers," came a cultured voice.

"Good evening, sir," answered the old man. He shut and bolted the door, then returned once more to his room, where he fetched a fresh glass from his cupboard and placed it beside his guest who had already seated himself. The eyes of the latter had at once caught sight of the used glass.

"Had someone else here, this evening?"

"Yes, sir. A little matter of business." The stooping figure seated itself opposite the other, and leant forward. "What is it you require?"

"Three thousand pounds," the answer came back pat, "for 'The Seventy Sapphires'."

Without a word the other leant back in his chair. His thoughts had flown to the man who had just left him. His quick, alert brain was trying to decide which of the two was lying, or alternatively, what was in the wind. There was quite an appreciable pause while these thoughts flashed through his mind, and the whole time his new visitor kept his eyes glued on his face. Suddenly the stooping figure leant forward again.

"To me," he said quietly, "'The Seventy Sapphires' is worth just about two thousand five hundred. I cannot see myself getting any more for the stones once I have made the disposal

perfectly safe by cutting them about. You will understand this means that most of the value of the necklace has gone. They must be taken from their settings and the matching, which is nearly all the value of the necklace, is quite useless to you or to me. I can offer you two thousand, twenty per cent. is all that I require."

"Thank you," said the other curtly, "but I know as much about your job as you do, Vickers, and I know as much about the sort of profits that you make as you do yourself. Don't you forget it. Three thousand is my price. Yes or no?"

The other leant back again before replying. An idea had occurred to him, an idea which thrilled him.

"Would it be indiscreet to ask," he said suddenly, "when I may expect the necklace?"

"To-night."

"Er . . . have you got it with you?"

"No," replied the other, "but I shall have it and I will guarantee to bring it here within a couple of hours."

The eyes of the stooping figure, under cover of the bushy eyebrows, shot towards the mantelpiece and noted the time shown by an old, cheap clock. He was treating this visitor very differently from the manner in which he had treated Weight. He knew well the resources which the man opposite him had for disposing of his ill-gotten plunder. He knew that if he did not accept the price, his visitor would leave

him and go to someone else. He came to a decision.

"Three thousand it shall be; but three thousand is a large sum of money. I can't give it to you all to-night. Two thousand down on receipt of the necklace and one thousand to-morrow. Will that do?"

For a moment the other hesitated, then he nodded and rose to his feet.

"Very well. I can trust you, Vickers, but I'd just like to mention that if there's any hanky-panky about that other thousand and I don't get it before midday to-morrow there'll be, well . . . shall we say, trouble?"

His voice was silky in its menace.

"I quite understand."

The stooping figure led the way across the room, back to the hall, and opened the front door just wide enough to allow his visitor to pass through, which the latter did without a word. He closed the door softly, replaced the bolts and returned, this time with remarkable agility, to the arm-chair by the fire.

THE rain was pouring down in torrents on the dismal streets when Detective Inspector Lynton left Scotland Yard that same evening. He quickly hailed a taxi and directed the driver to a street in Whitechapel, then leant back wearily and stared out at the steady downpour. The dreariness of the evening, however, in no way depressed the young Inspector. His thoughts were too occupied with his own concerns to be affected at all by the elements. One thing was uppermost in his mind—to catch Sherwood, and it was in order to make absolutely certain that Hurst had not overlooked any possible clue which might lead to his arrest that Lynton was now on his way to McGrory's rooms.

Although his brain was concentrated on this vital problem, he could not keep his thoughts from straying to Estelle Desmond. All during the day a strange feeling of excitement and happiness had lain at the back of his mind; only to be accounted for by the fact that in the evening he would see her again. It was useless for him to laugh and call himself sentimental, to try to drive her entirely from his thoughts; she only filled them all the more, and he now allowed himself to think of her, of her wonderful

charm and personality, the softness of her voice, her beautiful eyes, her . . .

Lynton pulled himself up with a jerk. This wouldn't do at all. Estelle Desmond was nothing to him, just a pretty girl who had got herself into rather a bad mess and wanted his help to get out of it. He wasn't doing much to help her, allowing his mind to wander in this fashion; far better if he tried to unravel the secret of Sherwood's whereabouts. He smiled grimly as he thought of that young man.

"Won't be long before your number's up, my lad. You'll be sorry you made a fool of Inspector Lynton before I've finished with you."

But where could the man be hiding—and in what disguise? Lynton turned over in his mind all the possible haunts in which criminals were apt to lie concealed whenever the police were out after their blood; useless to look there, he knew; yet nevertheless, he was relieved to think that at the present moment those same places were being carefully searched by diligent policemen. This was such a slippery eel to catch; not one man, but many. Lynton's brows were creased deeply in his bewilderment; a worried, perplexed look on his face. He had only ten days, too, in which to land the man; ten days, and one nearly over. He sighed heavily; there was now an additional reason for him to hasten things, so that Estelle might be free to take up her first big chance.

Inspector Lynton smiled ruefully to himself. Again his thoughts had flown to the girl. There

seemed small hope of his being able to stop them.

"Got it badly this time, old man," he murmured softly.

A figure passing along the street, bearing some slight resemblance to McGrory, suddenly recalled that individual to the Inspector's mind.

"Not much reason in him being let loose now," he thought. "We know who the johnnie is who's got the two thousand, and I don't suppose McGrory can help us to get his whereabouts. I'll give instructions for him to be brought in to-morrow."

At this moment he saw that they were driving along a rather sordid street which Lynton knew to be not far away from McGrory's lair. One or two passers-by had stared curiously at the taxi and Lynton decided to finish the remainder of his journey on foot. He jumped out, paid the driver, then proceeded to walk quickly along. There was no reason in giving away the fact that he was in the locality and a taxi was too noticeable in those parts to escape attention.

It was already dark and there were few people about. Lynton began to wonder whether he would not have been well-advised to have brought a plain-clothes man with him. It was on the cards, although unlikely, that McGrory had returned to his haunt, for since his escape he would, of course, avoid the place, fearing capture. On the other hand, McGrory had not been in funds when he had made his get-away, and it was quite possible that he would require some

from his hoard, since he would have no means of knowing that it had been rifled by this man Sherwood. As these thoughts rushed through his mind, Lynton's hand unconsciously went to his pocket and his fingers came in contact with the cold metal of the small automatic which he always carried. He smiled to himself.

"Nerves, old lad. Don't be an ass. This little companion will protect you in case of need, and anyway it's most unlikely that McGrory will be at home."

As he approached the neighbourhood of the street in which McGrory lived, Lynton wondered whether he was not wasting his time in this expedition. Hurst had made a thorough examination of the room, of every article in it, and had found no clue of any sort which might identify the murderer. They knew who he was, of course, but it would have been a very useful thing for Scotland Yard, once Ben Sherwood had been captured and placed in custody, to be able to produce the weapon with which the deed had been done, bearing finger-prints of the accused man, in order to corroborate the evidence of the girl. It was unlikely that Hurst had made any mistake or had omitted to notice anything which might be of value; but Lynton had learnt from long experience that anything of importance was best done personally, and the more he considered the matter the more he inclined to the view that even if he found nothing he was not wasting time. It was a gamble. It might conceivably happen that his keen eyes

would notice something that Hurst had overlooked.

Upon reaching this point in his deliberations he arrived at the house, and fitting into the door the key which he had taken from Hurst, he let himself in. For a moment he remained motionless, listening intently, but no sound came to warn him of any other presence. Flashing his pocket torch he saw the sordid little hall in all its bareness. He let the rays light up the floor, and in spite of himself he breathed a sigh of relief. It had rained a good deal that day, but there were no signs of muddy patches or marks on the floor. It was more than likely, therefore, that no one had entered the house that day.

But, one hand holding the automatic ready for instant use, Lynton decided to take no chances. Quietly he slipped into the living-room and flashed his torch all round. There was no one there. Satisfied, he turned to McGrory's bedroom. A quick glance round convinced him that here again there was no lurking danger. The room was just as Hurst had described it. Not very neat and not very tidy, but quite comfortable all the same. McGrory was evidently a man who was not particular as to the cleanliness of his surroundings, but it was equally obvious that he enjoyed a certain measure of comfort. A deep armchair stood by the fireplace, and the bed, disarranged now by Hurst's men, was large and comfortable. The mattress was just as Hurst had left it, on top of the blankets.

Lynton examined it carefully. There was the dark, ominous stain, the long slits where the fabric had been ripped by the knife, probably the same knife which Sherwood had used in his murderous attack on his ex-colleague. The interior substance of the mattress had been largely removed and, as Hurst had told him he would, Lynton found it under the bed. The gruesome fact that it had been ejected in order to make room for the body came home to Lynton and made him shudder as he realised how cool and quick must be this man's brain, even at the actual moment of performing his vile act. The more he heard and saw of the man's methods, the more did Lynton appreciate that he was up against a criminal of extraordinary audacity and indomitable nerve ; a man who would stop at nothing. He looked up apprehensively at the dark shadows of the room, and wished that there was some way in which he could illuminate the place entirely, and not be forced to rely upon the torch in his hand. The lamp which was apparently the only means of lighting, however, had been removed by Hurst in order that it could be tested for finger-prints ; but this, as Lynton knew to his sorrow, had yielded so many which were exceedingly blurred, that it had been entirely useless for the purpose in hand.

The Inspector flashed the torch all round the room, his quick eye searching for some other object which might have been handled by Sherwood and might establish that proof, which was so urgently required, of his presence there.

He could, however, see nothing which would be of the slightest use. Lynton moved to the centre of the room and standing by the table stared down at it. The size of the mark which showed where the lamp had been, and stains which appeared as dark patches under the rays of his torch, irritated him.

"Blast you," he said churlishly, to the table. "Why the devil, if you can show those signs, can't you give us a decent set of fingerprints?"

He knew that Hurst had not overlooked the table, that it had yielded nothing . . . then suddenly a brilliant idea came to him, or brilliant it seemed. For a moment he stood motionless, a gleam shining in his eyes; then he quickly moved to that part of the room which Estelle had described to him as being the exact place where the man had been murdered; he knelt down and let his torch play on the floor all round. A quick examination convinced him that this was the very spot where Sherwood had placed the corpse in the mattress, for there were faint traces—not easily discernible, but visible enough now that he was particularly seeking them—of the stuffing which had been removed to make space for it. Quickly he compared them with the mass under the bed and saw that they were identical.

Lynton rose to his feet and stood for a moment frowning into the darkness.

"That stuff was swept up with something. Now, let me see. Sherwood took great pains to leave the place exactly as he found it. He's

a man who would probably think of details, too. Cunning devil. He swept that up with something which is not, apparently, in this room ; at least, I can't see anything that would serve the purpose."

He flashed his torch round once more and directed it particularly to the fireplace, in search of a brush of some sort, but there was none.

"Yes, Sherwood is good at details, I should think. If he took a brush to do the work from some other place, he'd have put it back there. What about the other room ?"

Quickly Lynton passed through into the living-room and at once caught sight of a little short-handled brush by the fireplace, apparently used for clearing coal dust from the fender. The handle was of wood, and to his great joy Lynton saw that it was highly polished and fairly wide.

"My God," he said to himself, "I think I've got it at last."

He bent down by the brush, and taking a silk handkerchief from his pocket wrapped this very carefully round the handle, so that should there be any marks on it they would not be erased ; then, lifting it up, he examined the bristles. Lynton rose to his feet, an expression of triumph on his face, for he had seen what were undoubtedly the very self-same traces as those on the floor in the other room. His deduction had been correct ; that brush had been, used to clear away the sweepings.

The young Inspector was now satisfied that the place had given him all the clues that it

was likely to ; he could do nothing else there. He felt, however, that he would look rather stupid walking through the streets with a brush in his hand, only partially concealed by a silk handkerchief, and in order to escape attention he held it under his coat. He went quickly from the house, locked the door, and was lucky enough to catch a 'bus at the far end of the street. This conveyed him to a more habitable quarter, where he was able to secure a taxi, and in a short time he deposited the brush at Scotland Yard, giving instructions that it should be examined for fingerprints. He then enquired whether Hurst was in the building, and on being informed that the Inspector was still in his office, Lynton hastened to him.

After telling Hurst all about the clue he had found, Lynton said :

"By the way, Hurst, there's no point in McGrory being at large any longer now. He can't tell us more than we know. You'd better give instructions to his shadowers to bring him in."

A frown passed over the other's face. He hesitated a moment and then looked up :

"I'm sorry, old man, but I've got a piece of bad news for you. There's been a 'phone call from the two shadowers to say they've lost trace of him. He's shaken them off somehow . . . but don't worry, it won't be for long."

Lynton momentarily gave way to his irritation.

"The fools ! Couldn't keep him in sight even for a day ! Lord ! This is a bad business,

Hurst. God knows what Tudor will say. I'm finished if we don't get him back."

"We'll get him before the night's out." The other spoke confidently. "I've detailed five men to round him up. He can't possibly escape; he's got nowhere to go to and no money."

Somewhat comforted by Hurst's reassuring words, Lynton took leave of him and passed out once more into the unceasing rain. Regardless of the weather he walked on rapidly, his mind occupied with this fresh development. He was still badly shaken by the news. McGrory was a clever scoundrel; he wouldn't be an easy fish to catch—and it was through him that the man was now at large. A wave of depression overwhelmed him; his difficulties seemed insuperable, seemed, indeed, to be increasing every moment. Then suddenly his thoughts flew to Estelle and he felt instantly cheered.

"Don't go getting cold feet, old chap," he murmured to himself. "Everything'll come right. I'll get his fingerprints and Estelle can give evidence"—in his thoughts he had already called her Estelle—"and as for McGrory, as Hurst says, he's bound to be caught sooner or later; anyway before ten days are up."

A sudden torrential downpour made him realise that he was becoming uncomfortably damp; he turned up his coat collar and walked on rapidly, taking a short cut towards his lodgings. The thought of his coming meeting with Estelle filled him with pleasure; how glad she would

be when he told her about the clue he had managed to find ! Then another thought struck him. Wasn't there something else he could do before finishing up for the night, something which would hasten the solving of Sherwood's whereabouts ?

Although he was feeling, by now, very tired and dispirited, the thought of Estelle spurred him on to further action. He determined to spare himself nothing, to leave no stone unturned—he was working now for her as much as for himself. Then an idea occurred to him. He stopped dead, his fatigue forgotten, excitement lighting up his eyes.

“What about old man Vickers,” he murmured softly to himself. “He knows everyone ; he's bound to know Sherwood. Suppose I go along to him now, tip him the wink to be on the look-out for him and to let me know. Yes, I'll do that. Good idea, my lad. I'll go at once.”

Swinging round abruptly, much to the annoyance of a pedestrian behind into whom he bumped, Lynton retraced his steps quickly and arriving at a cross-roads took a street leading towards the neighbourhood of Vickers' house.

The rain was falling more heavily now and thick clouds darkened the night ; a fact for which Lynton was thankful. It was unwise to be too noticeable in the old informer's neighbourhood. Thoughts raced through his brain as to the outcome of his idea and he suddenly decided to ask Vickers' help in tracing McGrory also. He might well be this man's confidant. Yes,

the more he thought of it, the more pleased was Lynton at his happy thought.

He looked at his watch. It was late ; much later than he had thought, and he was getting extremely hungry. He decided, however, to put his plan into action immediately, delaying only long enough to have some food somewhere on the way. Even as these thoughts passed through his mind he saw the lights of a restaurant on the other side of the street. Quickly entering, he consumed a hasty meal, then chartering a taxi he travelled to within a few hundred yards of Vickers' house, where he paid the man off and proceeded to complete his journey on foot.

As Lynton approached the house he could not see any light shining from the windows. He tapped gently on the door and waited patiently for it to be opened ; but no sound came from within. The Inspector knew that Vickers lived alone and looked after himself and that no servant of any sort was kept in the house. An uneasy thought flashed through his mind that his luck might be over for that night ; that Vickers might be out. He knocked again, however, very loudly this time ; but still there came no reply to his summons. Something, a sense of evil, seemed to diffuse from the place and affected Lynton's nerves. The young man metaphorically shook himself in order to be rid of the sensation, but it persisted.

"Damn it," said Lynton to himself. "Most unusual of the old fellow to be out at this hour. Wonder what he's up to ? And I don't like this

feeling ; what the devil does it mean ? I must say, I'd like to see inside that house very much indeed."

For a moment or two he waited ; then again rapped loudly on the door.

"Three times lucky, perhaps," he said to himself.

But not in his case. There came no sound of footsteps ; there came no sound at all to prove that the house was inhabited. Lynton glanced uneasily at the shuttered windows of the room which he knew to be Vickers' living-room, but no sign of light, not even the usual crack, could be seen.

"Damn it ; I believe he's out," he said, softly.

As he did so he glanced to the other side of the building. There was a pathway leading to the back of the house, which stood in its own little garden. Lynton moved across swiftly and followed this round until he was standing opposite the back door. He examined this closely. The hinges were rusty ; there was dust and dirt everywhere. Evidently Vickers was not in the habit of using the door, for from the look of it this did not appear to have been opened for some considerable time ; but one ground floor window was slightly lowered. Lynton looked at it, and as he did so a thought came to him, a thought which, try as he would, he could not banish from his mind. He knew that he himself would be a law-breaker if he forced ingress into that house ; he knew he had no

right to do so and might be hauled over the coals very severely if he yielded to the temptation ; but it was strong, very strong. Once more, this time with renewed force, came that feeling of something evil about the place which had so tremendously affected the young Inspector when standing a short while before at the front door waiting for his knock to be answered. For a moment or two Lynton still hesitated, then caution went to the winds and two quick steps brought him to the window.

Very quietly, very gently, he forced it open and, after a quick glance round to make quite sure that he was unobserved, he drew himself up by his arms, lifted one foot over the sill and a second later stood upright within the house. Lynton grinned to himself in the darkness. Here was he, a thief-catcher, actually performing the same feat and going through the same sensations as the men whom he normally hunted. He stood quite still and listened intently, but there came no sound—the house seemed a house of the dead. At last he dared to flash his torch momentarily in order to gain his bearings, and found he was in a small kitchen and that a door was facing him.

On tiptoe he approached it and gently placed his hand on the door-knob, which he turned. To his great relief the door opened without a sound and moving noiselessly he walked into a sort of central hall, which apparently ran the whole length of the house. For a moment he paused, wondering what it was that had caused

him to deviate so abruptly from the path of strictly lawful duty. He did not know what it was that he sought, what he expected to see, but of one thing he was quite certain—that there was something in that house, something which, could he only discover it, would be of incalculable use to him.

“I’ve got a hunch,” said Lynton to himself. “I’ve got a hunch.”

He determined to investigate first of all the room in which he had previously interviewed Vickers. Very cautiously he approached the door and tried the handle. It opened at once with no resistance or sound and he stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. Lynton remembered that the windows were shuttered and, therefore, providing he kept the rays of his torch away from the crack, he could well risk a light, since the faint illumination would not be noticed from the outside. He switched on his torch. All in that room was as he had seen it before. There was nothing unusual, nothing out of place. His keen glance rested immediately on the little table which stood between the two chairs that had been occupied by Vickers and himself on his recent visit. He saw a bottle and three glasses on it.

“Hullo,” said Lynton to himself. “The old gentleman’s been entertaining again, I see. Wonder where the devil he’s got to.”

He lifted one glass, the one nearest him, and smelt it; there was still a strong odour of spirits and he saw that a few drops had been left at the

bottom. Lynton whistled softly. It had not yet evaporated ; it could not be long since that glass had been used. Suddenly a feeling that Vickers might réturn at any moment came to him, a feeling which was decidedly unpleasant, for he knew that he must not be caught in this flagrant act of unprofessional conduct. He half turned, almost decided to leave, when it occurred to him that he would like to examine the cupboard from which he had seen Vickers take the bottle. It was a large cupboard set in the wall, running to within a foot of the ceiling, intended obviously for crockery. Lynton moved over to it and tried the door. It was locked.

“ Funny,” he muttered ; “ certainly wasn’t locked when I was here, because he opened it without using a key. Perhaps the old miser locks it up in case anybody like me should creep in when he’s not present and try to purloin a drink or two.”

He turned, and as he did so saw the rays of his torch fall on the desk. A key was lying on it, half hidden by a blotting-pad.

“ Might as well have a try,” murmured Lynton to himself.

He picked up the key and fitted it in the lock of the large cupboard. To his joy it turned easily and he threw open the door.

For one horrible moment he stood as if transfixed ; then involuntarily he slammed the door to and stood aghast at his action, fearing that someone might have heard the noise. But this moment of panic quickly passed.

"Thought I had a hunch," he said grimly.

Turning, he saw the telephone standing on the desk. In a second he had reached it and called up Scotland Yard. He waited impatiently for an answer to come through, and although this actually happened in a very short space of time, it seemed to him hours before anyone replied.

"Hullo ! "

"Scotland Yard ? "

"Yes."

"Inspector Lynton speaking."

"Yes, sir."

"Inspector Hurst in ? "

"No, sir."

"What ? "

"No, sir, he's just been called away urgently."

"Oh, all right then. Inspector in charge, please."

"Half a minute, sir."

A moment later another voice answered, the voice of an Inspector whom Lynton knew well."

"That you, Sammy ? John Lynton speaking."

"Oh, yes, John."

"Send a couple of men down to Vickers' place at once, please. Urgent."

"Right."

Lynton hung up the receiver. He did not waste any time while waiting for the men. Carefully he removed the already stiff corpse of the old man from the cramped position in which it had been thrown into the cupboard, and examined it. The man had been killed by

a knife in precisely the same way as had that other fellow known as the Dude.

"Poor old fellow," said Lynton to himself. "Funny! I was talking about you to Superintendent Tudor not so very long ago. I said I wondered how long you'd run. He seemed to think you'd go on for some time yet. I was right, I see. I wonder who got you, old fellow? No knife again; no weapon. Damn it."

He made a quick examination of the room to see whether he could find any trace of an implement which might have been used to kill the old informer, but there was no sign of any sharp blade which would fit the wound. Lynton knew his business well. He went about it mechanically making all the usual investigations, and had just completed his task when there came a knock on the door. He knew that knock; it was loud and obviously made by members of the police force. Quickly he ran to the door and allowed two constables to enter, then shutting it he led them to the room and showed his discovery. He had carefully packed away the three glasses and the bottle which had been on the table; these he handed to one of the men with instructions to return immediately to Scotland Yard and have them examined for finger prints. He left the other man in charge of the house temporarily until he could relieve him. He then completed his investigations, but was disappointed to find no trace of any clue which would help to elucidate the mystery. Taking the policeman with him to the back of

the house, he carefully examined the bolts of the back door to make quite certain that it was securely locked, and turning to the man spoke rapidly.

"I'm going to leave by the window, the same way that I came in. You will make all firm as soon as I have left. Leave the front door unbolted and if anyone comes in using a latchkey arrest him at once. Here, take this . . . you may need it."

He handed the constable his automatic, which the man took eagerly.

"Don't worry. I shall be back just as soon as I can manage it, with some plain-clothes fellows," went on Lynton. "I shall want this house watched, but not occupied. In the meantime, however, I daren't leave that corpse alone to get lost, destroying all proof, so you've got to stay and see that it's all right. I shan't be gone long."

With that he slipped quickly out of the window and waited just long enough to see the man, left to his lonely vigil, make sure that this was properly secured. He then vanished into the night, going as quickly as possible towards Scotland Yard.

AN observer, standing by the railings of Hyde Park on that tempestuous evening of scudding clouds and incessant rain, would have seen a curious sight—a phenomenon which has baffled many—the extraordinary fact that certain people are quite willing to brave all manner of discomfort in order to view their fellow men rejoicing in luxury and ease. Was it envy or merely curiosity which had drawn that little band of ragged spectators to cluster around the railings of the great house near the Park, gazing silently in expressionless intensity at the glimpses of festivity within the vast ballroom, glimpses which great curtains, indifferently pulled together across the windows, quite failed to conceal.

On any less inclement evening that knot of watchers would not have been so surprising; the scene was, indeed, sufficiently brilliant to warrant their interest. Beautiful women, their charms enhanced by Parisian artistry, their necks and arms liberally bedecked with precious jewels, swayed gracefully in the arms of tall, well-groomed men, whose black clothes acted as a foil to the bright hues of their partners' attire. Strains of dance music came in snatches to the listeners outside; the contrast between the wealth and comfort within those walls and the stark

misery and want of the people without seemed unduly cruel. Far better, one would have thought, had they averted their heads and hastened by instead of remaining there, regardless of the rain, staring with haggard eyes at the radiant scene.

A great red carpet and striped awning covered the steps leading to the huge front door, at each side of which stood liveried footmen. Every few minutes a car would draw up to swell the already vast throng outside the house, from which a belated guest would quickly step and sail majestically within those festive portals. Every time this occurred the watching eyes would turn with one accord from the lighted windows, and rest attentively on each new arrival. No word was spoken; the men stood as though entranced—which, God knows, perhaps they were—as though, indeed, they gleaned some sort of spurious pleasure out of their second-hand participation in the proceedings. Beauty and wit within, despair and squalor without, while over all the rain, symbolical of nature's merciless indifference to rich and poor alike, drove down unceasingly on the already drenched streets.

To one of that motley little crowd the glimpses which he could catch of the lighted room was of great interest. His was a curiously bent figure, that of an old man clad in an overcoat with collar turned up, and slouching hat which concealed most of his features. He seemed also to cling to the shadows, to be merely the outline of a human being. Ben Sherwood shook himself;

his limbs were aching from the cramped attitude which he was forced to adopt so as to be in keeping with the character he portrayed. He longed to straighten himself up if only for a moment, in order to rest his aching limbs, but was far too great an artist to allow himself even that moment of respite. It was too dangerous ; for all he knew he might now be watched, either by men of Weight's gang or by one or other member of that band which he had so recently deserted. There was nothing unusual, perhaps, in Vickers, old man Vickers as they called him, being present to watch the feat performed, but should either lot suspect his identity for half a moment he would be in a very serious quandary indeed.

The rain was dripping from his eyebrows, and Sherwood cursed the evil fortune which had brought a night like this to mar the exploit he proposed to accomplish. A more practical thought came to his mind as well, the knowledge that he could not entirely trust to the gum keeping those eyebrows in place. Sherwood laughed to himself in the darkness. Should he lose one it would be a catastrophe ; but even so he would be fairly well protected by the slouching hat, which he had found in one of Vickers' cupboards.

He came to the conclusion, at last, that he was doing no good standing there among the crowd, gazing at what little could be seen of the festivities within the house. Weight was inside with his men. No doubt he had arranged to

remove "The Seventy Sapphires" with all possible speed from that mansion, once he had obtained them. When this would be was another matter, but from what he had said—within a couple of hours—the necklace was to be stolen that evening and in a very short time. The chief, however, had been equally confident that he would obtain possession of the stones, and he again had stated a definite time which corresponded with that suggested by Weight. In these circumstances Sherwood, knowing what he did about the man who had so recently controlled his fortunes, realised that the chief proposed to prey on the men detailed off by Weight to remove and receive the jewels. Both these men, the chief's and Weight's representatives, must be about somewhere, for obviously the first thing Weight would do was to remove the necklace from that house.

Sherwood shuffled off, taking great pains to retain the awkward walk and stooping figure of the old man whom he was impersonating. A long line of cars stood outside the building, and many of the chauffeurs were standing about in groups waiting until their masters or mistresses were ready to leave the ball and go home. Unobtrusively Sherwood mingled with these men, wondering if by any chance he would find from them his clue as to the method the chief was employing. A car was almost certainly essential to ensure the quick transference of the jewels; here were many cars, among which, perhaps, was one that had brought no guest to the festivities,

but instead was waiting to receive the booty. However, as he approached the end of the line Sherwood felt sorely disappointed, for there was not a single man among those chauffeurs whom he recognised, and he knew well by sight all of Weight's men, unless a new member had been enrolled recently.

At the end of the line of cars there was a side street, down which, Sherwood remembered, was a public-house. A very superior public-house, certainly; half a wine shop in the day-time, but without doubt a haven of refuge that evening for those men who had to wait out in the cold at the bidding of their employers. Possibly some of these chauffeurs would be in there. Sherwood looked at his watch. It was not yet closing time, although not far off. In any case he felt that a drink would warm him up and be acceptable, so he made his way down the street and turned in at the parlour door.

Just as he did so, however, he stopped dead before entering. A car was standing outside, not exactly opposite the tavern, but about thirty yards down the street. It was an open tourer of a very fast make. Sherwood regarded it with interest. There was nothing to connect this apparently deserted car with either Weight or the chief, yet he felt convinced that there was something curious about it; otherwise why should it remain unattended in that downpour so late at night? Sherwood allowed himself to glance at this for a moment, long enough to make him realise that he was well acquainted with the

type and would be able to drive it if necessary. He then pushed open the parlour door and entered the tavern. He had been right. Many men, some—from their uniform—obviously chauffeurs, were seated around the tables, one or two standing by the bar. As unobtrusively as possible Sherwood shuffled over to a corner, the darkest he could see, and sat down at a vacant table. A moment or two later a generous measure of whisky stood in a glass before him. He lifted it to his lips and took a good mouthful, feeling better at once; the spirit warmed him satisfyingly. Ever since his failure to recognise any of Weight's men among the waiting chauffeurs, a wave of depression had overwhelmed him. It seemed the odds were too great; he had no idea as to the method which the chief proposed to employ, no clue as to the identity of the final recipient of the necklace. He no longer anticipated success to his own scheme; with dejected spirits he had lifted the glass. Now, however, his despondency vanished, the liquor had cheered him enormously. His luck would turn, he knew it would; had it ever failed him yet? He took another mouthful and replaced his empty glass on the table. As he did so a voice spoke to him.

“Evening, old man.”

Sherwood looked round sharply. Seated by his side was a man whom he had not noticed on entering the place, but a man whose face he knew well. Sherwood's heart leapt within him. He had not been wrong; the luck was turning.

“Evening, Rogers.”

Sherwood spoke in the voice of the man he was impersonating, in the voice of the receiver, Vickers.

"What are you doing here?" asked the other in a hoarse whisper.

"Just having a look round," replied Sherwood quietly. "And you?"

"I had an idea," said Rogers, "that the chief had been to visit you and that you knew all about it."

"The chief, as you call him," replied Sherwood, "did come to visit me to-night. He informed me that he had something of which he wanted to dispose. I agreed to a price."

"I know," said the other, quickly. "And I was to deliver it to you. Mustn't be late, by the way." He looked at his watch. "No, got plenty of time yet. But what are you doing up here?"

"Thought I'd come up to see a little fun. Your chief didn't vouchsafe the method by which he proposed to lift the goods. I thought I'd come along and watch the process for myself."

"Look here," said the other, leaning forward and speaking very low. "It will save a lot of trouble if you stay here. Then all I have got to do is to slip round the corner when I get the stuff and deposit it with you. Have you got the money on you?"

"No," said Sherwood, quietly. "I don't carry all that amount about as a rule. I hadn't any idea that I'd run into you, you see, or any of your lot. But I'll tell you what we can do.

If you'll tell me how you propose to get down to my place, you can pick me up and take me back. That will save time."

An idea suddenly came to Sherwood.

"Is that your car outside?"

The other laughed shortly.

"Not as yet," he said.

Sherwood looked at him and received a wink for his pains.

"You fellows, you know, are pretty marvellous," said Sherwood, quietly. "I don't know how the devil you manage to do your affairs. I'd be very interested to know how you propose to land this one. What do you mean—'not as yet'?"

For a moment Rogers hesitated. Sherwood watched him with some inner amusement. He had always thought that this man, with whom he had worked so often in the past for the very chief to whom he had referred, was not quite to be trusted. He could see that Rogers was longing to tell him the details of the exploit. A sense of caution only kept him back. Sherwood decided to overcome that prudence if he possibly could.

"What's worrying you?" he said, banteringly. "Think I'm going to interfere? Not me. Between ourselves," he became confidential, "between ourselves, Rogers, the sum of money I'm giving to your chief isn't a very big price for 'The Seventy Sapphires.' I'm going to make a handsome profit out of it, but I thought I'd just come along and see what I could see. You know, I so seldom take an active part now. In

fact I haven't for over twenty years. Sometimes it gets me rather to sit at home and just take my profit from what is brought in. I like to see a bit of action. Go on, tell me. How's it going to happen?"

He watched the other covertly to see the effect of his words. For a moment Rogers did not answer; he sat staring at the table, a rather superior, self-satisfied smirk on his face. But suddenly he turned to Sherwood.

"Well, old man," he said, "I can't see any harm in letting you into the fun. It really is rather clever, I must say. You see that fellow over there," Rogers nodded cautiously towards a young man dressed in chauffeur's uniform seated alone at a table, consuming a drink, "that's one of Weight's gang. He's going to do the work and we get the goods." He smiled broadly. "That chappie is to drive the car outside round to the house, to be directly opposite at eleven o'clock. At this mystic hour the lights in the ballroom go out, the good lady loses her necklace, which is gently removed by a waiter, who passes it to a man on the balcony. He then throws it into the car. I understand that he's been practising this for weeks, so there isn't much risk of him missing. All that fellow has to do is to drive off with the goods. That's their little scheme. Quite good, but not a patch on ours! The chief's little effort is this. That fellow's obviously going to stay here till the last possible moment; by that time most of the others'll have gone. When he goes I follow

him, get into conversation and knock him out, finish him off if necessary. I shove him into the back of the car, under the waterproof cover, take his place, collect the goods when they're thrown into the car and drive off like hell to you. Neat, don't you think ? ”

Rogers suddenly paused at the end of his recital.

“ A darned good idea,” said Sherwood. “ By gosh, no wonder your chief gets away with things. That's a great idea, that is. His information must be wonderful.”

“ Yes,” said Rogers, “ it is. He's got . . . oh, well . . . ”

Sherwood laughed.

“ Discretion. I see. But I know he's got some pretty good men acting as his eyes and ears. Must have. Look at that McGrory case.”

Rogers looked at him sharply. For a moment Sherwood was afraid that his vanity had led him to make a false move, but he was at once satisfied that Rogers had no suspicion of him.

“ Well,” said Rogers, “ that wasn't so good. The chief is furious about that. One of his fellows let him down, you know.”

“ What ? ”

“ Fellow by the name of Sherwood. Do you know him ? ”

“ Yes.” The words came slowly. “ Yes, I know him. Haven't seen him lately, though.”

“ And I don't suppose you will,” went on Rogers, with some venom. “ He's got a good deal against his account at the moment. I

believe the police want him for murder ; but that isn't what he's afraid of, I'll bet. What that man is afraid of at the moment, what will keep him out of the way, is in case he should fall into the chief's clutches. By God, I don't envy him if he does. Far better to be convicted for murder and die a nice quick death with a noose round your neck."

"Yes," said Sherwood, "I agree."

Rogers suddenly grinned.

"Well, so long, old man. I'll meet you, then in—" he looked at his watch—"just over half an hour at the Guards Memorial. Won't be many people about there at that time. I'm just going to scrape acquaintance with my," he grinned broadly, "victim."

"Yes," said Sherwood to himself, as he watched the fellow wend his way between the tables towards the man whom he had previously pointed out. "Yes. You talk too much, my friend. It's a pity, because you're pretty good with your hands. I don't think I envy that fellow his evening's work very much."

He watched Rogers skilfully insinuating himself to the table at which sat Weight's man, and saw him casually strike up acquaintance. It was well done. There could be no possible suspicion attached to him. Sherwood signed to the man behind the bar and replenished his glass. A few minutes later he rose and left the place.

It had stopped raining now, but there was a high, squally wind which made the night quite unpleasant enough. He started to walk off in

the opposite direction to Park Lane ; he knew now all he wanted to know and his plans were made. Half an hour later found him seated on one of the benches in the Mall, waiting patiently for the time of his meeting. The minutes passed very slowly. He got colder every second, but thanked Providence that he was at least spared the discomfort of getting still more wet, as the rain no longer beat upon him. Only ten minutes or so were left before the appointed time. Sherwood got up and walked to the Guards Memorial.

He stood in the shadow cast by the statue and grinned to himself. No better meeting place for his plan could have been devised. Nobody was about ; they would be unobserved. Sherwood also realised that the weather, too, was on his side ; the rain had kept indoors all but those who were forced to leave their homes, and to a certain extent had relaxed the vigilance of policemen, who kept as much as possible to the shelter provided by the walls of houses, instead of walking in open spaces.

He had not long to wait. Suddenly he saw the lights of a touring-car approaching rapidly, and with a scrunching of brakes it came to a standstill only a few feet from him. Sherwood advanced quickly.

“ That you, mate ? ”

He saw Rogers looking at him.

“ Yes.”

Rogers turned his head to actuate the lever which opened the door, so that Sherwood could

enter the car. The latter seized his opportunity. The hand within his coat pocket was already gripping the end of a murderous little club, heavily weighted with lead. He whipped this out and crashed it against the head of the unsuspecting Rogers. The man fell instantly, sprawling out of his seat, no longer conscious of his surroundings. Sherwood threw off the shuffling movements of the man he was impersonating, and acted with the extraordinary speed that had been such an asset to him in his profession and made him so formidable a foe. His fingers quickly ran over the limp form of Rogers, prying into every pocket. It took him only a few seconds to find what he required, and rapidly, keeping to the shadows all the time, Sherwood made off in the darkness, the necklace known as "The Seventy Sapphires" safely hidden away in his pocket.

Ben Sherwood grinned to himself, well satisfied with his evening's work.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR LYNTON wasted no time in getting back to Scotland Yard. Once there he made his way direct to the Inspector with whom he had conversed on the telephone, and gave him certain curt and definite instructions. Making sure that his orders would be put into practice immediately, he turned to go upstairs to his own office, but was delayed by his companion as he was on the point of leaving the room.

"John, you haven't asked after Hurst?"

Lynton stood by the door.

"After Hurst?"

"Yes." The other smiled. "I gather you asked for Hurst first when you rang up this evening."

"Oh yes, Sammy, and I was told he was out on something urgent."

"Very urgent; a big case I rather gather. Disappointed you weren't in to take it over."

The facts of Lynton's discomfiture were well known in the force and he realised that his colleague was amusing himself at his expense.

"Stow it, Sammy. What do you mean? A big case?"

"The 'Seventy Sapphires' gone."

"The 'Seventy Sapphires'?"

Lynton pronounced the words in amazement;

he could scarcely believe what his friend had said. The "Seventy Sapphires," that necklace of great price, was as familiar to him as it was to the man in the street. It was probably the most photographed and advertised piece of jewellery in the country. Lynton knew, from what he had read about them, that the sapphires themselves were worth a good deal of money, but that the necklace known as "The Seventy Sapphires" was reputed to be of fabulous value because of the amazing matching of the stones of which it was comprised.

"The 'Seventy Sapphires' gone," he repeated, incredulously.

"Yes. At that ball in Park Lane to-night. Old Hurst went off like a shot from a gun. He's been back about ten minutes. First thing he did was to send for the Superintendent."

"For Tudor?"

"Yes. Evidently it's a big thing, old man. The Superintendent ought to be here any minute."

"Good Lord," said Lynton. "I think I'll go up and have a word with Hurst."

"How's old man Vickers?" called the other after him.

Lynton did not reply, but smiled grimly to himself. Sammy would know soon enough.

He found Inspector Hurst in his room in a much agitated frame of mind.

"What's happened, old lad?" asked Lynton.

Hurst was pleased to see him, there could be no denying that. Lynton realised that he would have been glad to see anybody in order to get

off his chest the story of the evening, but when he spoke he told his tale concisely and wasted no words. In a short space of time he informed Lynton of all that had happened in Park Lane ; how the lights in that house had suddenly gone out in the middle of a dance ; how almost simultaneously there had come a shriek out of the darkness and the startled guests had crowded round seeking to obtain as much illumination as possible from matches. Candles had been called for and were forthcoming, but not for some minutes. It was then found that the hostess had fainted and, worse, that the necklace which so lately had been adorning her slender neck was now missing. Some intelligent guest had hastened to the telephone and at once apprised Scotland Yard of what had happened, whereupon Hurst had gone off as fast as he could to investigate the matter. By the time he had arrived another startling fact had been revealed—that fully half of the hired, outside waiting staff had disappeared. This had given Hurst his clue. The activities of the gang controlled by the man Weight were known to the Yard, and the method employed here was similar to that used in other exploits of this band to gain entry into the house of their proposed victim. But that was the only clue which had been vouchsafed to him, careful though he had been to examine everything and question everyone. There was a story of a car which had been passing at the time when the lights had gone out, a car which had seemed to hesitate for a

moment and then to rush off with renewed speed towards Oxford Street—but this was a story only. The man who had offered it to Hurst, a chauffeur who had been waiting outside, had spoken rather haltingly as if he were not certain whether there could be any possible connection between the strange action of this mysterious car and the robbery which had taken place in the house at that very moment. Hurst himself had not made up his mind, but he had noted the fact in case it might be useful.

“Nothing else?” asked Lynton, as he saw that his friend had come to the end of his tale.

“Nothing else. Not a thing, John. It’s a most extraordinary case. Obviously it’s been done by Weight, and I’ve already given instructions for all the man’s haunts to be combed out. We’ll arrest him on suspicion if we can get him, but he’s an elusive customer, and even if I do get him I don’t see how we’re going to prove anything. He’s not such a fool as to have the damned necklace on him.”

The door opened at that moment and both Inspectors looked round, then stiffened to attention. Superintendent Tudor had entered the room.

“What’s this I hear, Hurst?” he said quickly, with a nod to Lynton.

In a matter-of-fact tone Inspector Hurst made his report to his superior, who had seated himself in a chair by the desk. Tudor heard him to the end without a word, and when he had finished

he remained silent for a moment, evidently deep in thought ; then he looked up quickly.

“ What measures have you taken ? ”

Hurst told him that all the known haunts of Weight were being combed out very carefully. A search was being made for any man known to be connected with his gang.

“ And the car ? ” asked Tudor, when he had finished.

“ The car, sir ? ” said Hurst.

“ Yes, Inspector. What is known of that car ? ”

“ . . . Er, practically nothing, sir.” Hurst was flustered. He did not like the tone of the Superintendent’s voice. He felt that the man was irritated, and Tudor in an irritated frame of mind was no friendly person with whom to deal. “ It’s an open tourer, sir. A sports model.”

“ What make ? ”

“ The chauffeur couldn’t say. He said it sounded rather like any of these small fast cars that are being made nowadays. The only thing he is certain about, sir, is the colour. It was green.”

“ Green car,” said Tudor, slowly. “ I hope that means ill luck for somebody. Seems to me that a lot hinges on that car, Inspector. I think . . . er, that if you had paid more attention to it, it would have been better, that is after you found there was nothing else to interest you in the house.”

“ Well, sir,” said Hurst, quickly, “ I’ve done

my best. I've got the chauffeur's address and a written statement of what he told me. I don't think I could have done anything else. He didn't know the number. It never occurred to him to look at it."

"No, I suppose it wouldn't. But still, Inspector, you will add to your other instructions, which are absolutely in order and obviously correct, that a weather-eye is to be kept open for a small, green, sports car answering to the description you have got, and that if it is sighted anywhere the fact is to be reported to us here immediately. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Go and see that it is done now."

"Very good, sir."

Hurst left the room. Superintendent Tudor looked up at Lynton.

"Well, Inspector Lynton," he said, quietly. "Why was Hurst put on this job to-night?"

His voice was cold. Lynton for some reason which he could not analyse felt rather apprehensive, but when Superintendent Tudor spoke like that nearly everyone was apprehensive.

"I . . . er, I don't know, sir. I suppose he was the senior Inspector present when the message came through."

"You were not here?"

"No, sir."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask you," said Tudor, quietly, "what you were doing?"

Lynton did not like the tone of voice nor the words which the Superintendent had used.

After all, there was, he told himself, no reason why he should have been there. It was rather hard to be blamed for not being in the Yard at a time when it was quite possible that he would be away, particularly as Superintendent Tudor had told him so certainly and in so many words that he thought he was unfit to take charge of an ordinary shop-lifting investigation. Inspector Lynton was apt to be a little quick-tempered, but he curbed his rising indignation as best he could and satisfied himself with answering the question in the same manner as that in which it had been put.

"Not in the least, sir. It so happens that I was engaged on business not unconnected with the task which has been assigned to me at the moment."

"That . . . er, your little . . . mistake, shall we say, on the Victoria to Brighton train?"

"Yes, sir."

Tudor looked up at him.

"I notice, young man," he said, and his voice suddenly was quite different and very friendly, "that you kept McGrory's escape out of the papers. That is to say, providing you did let him escape?"

There was no use in beating about the bush with Tudor; Lynton knew that only too well.

"We did let him escape, sir," he said, quietly, "and to very good purpose, I'm afraid."

"Oh?"

The other's voice was sharp.

"We let him escape, sir, and . . . er, I had

a couple of shadows on him the whole time—up to this evening.”

“Up to this evening. I don’t quite understand, Inspector; what are you getting at?”

“Nothing very much, sir, except that I have lost him.”

“You’ve *what*?”

Superintendent Tudor was frowning, his voice brimful of indignation.

“I’ve lost him, sir.”

“And you call that nothing very much?”

“Yes, sir. I don’t think it will be difficult to pick him up again, and anyway if I may remind you of a few words you spoke to me not so very long ago, sir, as long as I have him under lock and key somewhere in England in under ten days you’re not going to interfere with me.”

For a moment Lynton, who had dared greatly in making the remark, thought that his superior was about to explode with wrath, but Tudor’s whole countenance suddenly changed. He seemed to be struggling with himself: then he burst into loud laughter.

“Well said, my lad,” he cried, “you are absolutely correct. I’ve no right to badger you like this. Only—” here he became serious once more—“please understand that I meant what I said. You’ve got to have McGrory back under lock and key within a week, and you’ve got to find that man who fooled you.”

“Yes, sir . . . er, I . . . er . . . happen to know who he is already, sir.”

“Oh, do you?” Tudor’s voice was ominously

quiet, "and again would it be indiscreet to ask you when you propose to make a report on this subject?"

"Again not in the least, sir. I proposed to make a report this evening to you at your house, only your coming here saved me the trouble of going to you."

Lynton could not restrain himself from making this answer.

"I see," said Tudor; "very well, carry on."

But just as Lynton was about to speak the door was flung open and Hurst ran in. Tudor looked at him intently and saw that the man had something on his mind, something which would not keep.

"Well?" asked the Superintendent.

"The car's been found, sir."

"Ah!" A gleam of excitement came into the older man's eyes. "Where?"

"By the Guards Memorial, sir. Just off the Mall."

"Abandoned?"

"Well, sir, the man who was driving it is very badly injured and has been removed to hospital. A blow on the head. There was a dead man in the back of the car under the weatherproof cover."

"More and more interesting," said Tudor quietly. "Do we know either of these men?"

"Yes, sir. The dead man has been identified as one of Weight's gang. The unconscious man, who is expected to recover, is also known to us. He's a man called Rogers, with a bad record for burglary."

"Where is the car, Hurst?"

"Down in the courtyard, sir. It's being examined now."

"Good."

Hurst hesitated for a second.

"And there's one other thing, sir. I don't know whether it's important or not but I thought I'd just mention it to you. That old receiver Vickers has been hanging about Park Lane to-night."

"Oh, no, he wasn't," said Lynton, quietly.

Both men looked at him sharply. He had spoken almost unconsciously, not quite realising what he was saying, but now he had committed himself to state what he knew, and he turned to Superintendent Tudor.

"The receiver Vickers, sir, was not seen about Park Lane this evening. He could not have been. You see, I discovered his body in a cupboard in his house, about an hour ago. From the appearance of the corpse Vickers must have been dead for some hours."

Superintendent Tudor's shrewd face was turned to Lynton and his voice, when he spoke, was very serious.

"I think, Inspector," he said, quietly, "you'd better make that report which our friend Hurst interrupted. It looks to me as if these two cases are rather closely related."

"It does, sir."

Concisely, in as few words as possible, Lynton told his superior all that he had done that evening and all that he had discovered. The Super-

intendent heard him out without interruption, but Lynton could not suppress a smile at sight of the amazed expression on the face of his colleague Hurst. As soon as he had finished, Tudor spoke sharply :

“ Am I to understand, Lynton, that you have left that house containing the body of Vickers in charge of one uniformed policeman ? ”

Before replying Lynton looked at his watch.

“ For a short time, sir, that was so, but the moment I returned here I gave certain instructions. That uniformed policeman and the body of Vickers have now been removed, but nothing else has been touched. Outside the house, however, and completely surrounding it, but in such a manner that they are not likely to be noticed by any man approaching the house, there is a cordon of plain-clothes men. The moment he is seen to enter, the man will be arrested. I have very little doubt that he'll turn out to be our long-lost Sherwood.”

“ Thank you,” said Tudor, “ that's what I wanted to know.”

He looked up and for the first time smiled at the Inspector.

“ You did well, Lynton. I congratulate you. The idea of the brush was excellent. Incidentally there should be a report through by now with regard to fingerprints. Inspector Hurst, perhaps you will enquire and bring me any communications there may have been from the department.”

Hurst left the room and the moment the door was shut behind him, Tudor looked up. For

the first time since Lynton had known him, the rather unpleasant mask of severity vanished from his face ; instead there was a genuinely friendly smile.

"Good lad," he said quietly. "I'm glad you're making good. I shouldn't have cared to have lost you, Lynton."

Almost at once, however, to cover the confusion which his sudden unexplained change of front had produced in him, Tudor frowned heavily ; but the momentary tension, one of joy for Lynton, was broken by the reappearance of Hurst holding a paper in his hand.

"Here's the result of the investigation, sir. A distinct set of fingerprints has been found on the brush. These correspond with another set of fingerprints found on one of the glasses and on the bottle brought by Inspector Lynton from the house of Vickers. These have not been identified. There are fingerprints on the other two glasses, one set of which has been identified as those of Weight, but the other is unknown."

Tudor looked up, a gleam in his eye.

"Tudor, my lad," he said quietly. "We've got the girl's evidence to bring against Sherwood. We've only got to take his fingerprints when we get him and prove from the brush that he was at McGrory's ; and what's more we can trace the murder of Vickers to him. His presence in the house is suspicious, let alone the fact that he is presumably impersonating Vickers. I hope your men will be successful, Lynton, in

getting him to-night. It might be just as well to broadcast a description of Vickers in order that he may be searched for, anyway, wherever he may be in London. Give orders that a watch be kept on all the main roads, stations and trains. Circulate both descriptions, that given by the girl of Sherwood, and that of Vickers."

"Yes, sir," said Lynton quickly. "Already done."

"Eh?"

"I've done it already, sir. When I came in to-night."

Tudor looked at the young man appraisingly.

"Good. Well, when we find this Sherwood we're likely to find the 'Seventy Sapphires,' I think. The connection of Weight with the man impersonating Vickers seems to prove successfully that Weight visited Vickers very recently, probably with a view to negotiations for the disposal of the necklace. He, no doubt, hadn't the slightest idea that he was talking to Sherwood instead of to Vickers. There can be no doubt that Weight's gang performed the operations, and we may find out something from the man Rogers discovered in that car, when he recovers consciousness. I am to be informed as soon as he is fit to be questioned."

"Yes, sir," said Hurst. "Instructions have been left at the hospital to that effect."

"Right."

The Superintendent arose.

"I think that will be all, then. I will say good-night." He moved over to the door,

paused for a moment, then turned towards Lynton. "But remember, young man, that you're not out of the wood yet. I want the man who fooled you under lock and key, and it's in your interests and those of Inspector Birch at Brighton that McGroory should be recaptured within ten days."

"I shall not forget, sir," answered Lynton, quietly; a new note of confidence had crept into his voice.

MANY times during the long and dreary walk Sherwood was thankful that the rain had ceased. His thoughts were fully occupied with plans for the disposal of the marvellous necklace at present in his pocket. He knew he would have to be extremely careful, for if kept in its entirety, it would indeed be a white elephant. The stones would have to be prised from their settings, cut and to a very great extent ruined before they would become negotiable. In his interviews with Weight and the man he had known as his chief, Sherwood had spoken only the truth when he had laid stress on these same difficulties, but he felt pretty sure that he knew of a man who would give him as good a price as any, an old receiver who had a pawnshop in Portsmouth. Sherwood fully realised the danger of being caught in possession of the article, but for that matter he could afford to risk it. If he were caught he would be doomed even without it—and he knew it. This thought did not worry him, however. He had complete confidence in his abilities, both of mimicry and in the art of make-up, and felt assured that no one would suspect him to be other than the man he was impersonating. Had he not put this matter to

the test, to a very severe test? For neither Weight nor the chief were men easily to be deceived.

Sherwood wasted no thought on the victim of his assault whom he had left sprawling over the steering wheel of the car, near the Guards Memorial. He did not know whether or not he had killed him and, frankly, did not care. All the thought that he gave to him was to wonder how long it would be before the car and its gruesome contents were discovered and Scotland Yard on the trail.

Sherwood suddenly stopped dead in his tracks : *he was not sure whether the victim of his assault was dead or not.*

He realised, with the force of a blow, that he had made a mistake. He flattered himself that he did not often make mistakes and it annoyed him intensely to think that he had done so in this instance, particularly as it was a big mistake, an important matter. He should have made quite sure, of course, that the man was dead, in order that there was no fear of his recovering and giving away the fact that it had been the person whom he knew as Vickers, the receiver, who had assaulted him. Sherwood actually retraced his steps for a few paces, but realised that it was useless. To go back now to finish the man off would be to tempt Providence. Some time had elapsed since the assault, plenty of time for a strolling policeman or some late wayfarer to find the car and give the alarm. No—the greater distance that there was between

him and the car the better . . . but it was annoying : it meant another change of character. He would have to cease to be Vickers and assume the personality of someone else.

The problem weighed on his mind as he walked along, now much more quickly than before. He was irritated at not being able to hasten the journey by means of a taxi ; many importuning drivers, their cars hugging the kerb, slowly passed him, but he made no sign. As far as was possible he wanted no whispers of the fact that Vickers had been abroad that night to reach authority.

It was very nearly an hour later when he arrived in the vicinity of the old receiver's house. He walked along, his head down, hat well over his eyes, his coat collar turned up, taking every precaution to avoid notice as much as possible. A slouching figure passed him, to which Sherwood paid no attention, so engrossed was he in his own thoughts. A moment later, however, he heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind and a man touched him lightly on the shoulder. Sherwood stopped abruptly ; the fingers of his right hand crept to his pocket and gripped the handle of his knife, which he always carried. He turned slowly and looked at the man who had accosted him.

It was McGrory.

For a second Sherwood stared at him in the utmost amazement, quite unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes. He had known this man to be captured by the police, he had assumed

that, at that moment, he was safely under lock and key in Brighton. The shock of seeing him there was very great and he stood, for a while, gazing at McGrory as though transfixed.

"Evening, Vickers," said the well-known voice.

"Oh, good evening, McGrory. I . . . I thought you were at Brighton. That they'd got you at last."

"I was," said the other, grimly, "but I managed to spring from the gaol."

"To what?"

"To get away," replied McGrory, curtly.

Even in his intense alarm, which had now changed to heart-felt relief as he realised that the other thought he was Vickers, Sherwood remembered to act the part that he was playing, and his voice when he spoke was that of the old receiver.

"I was just coming to see you," said McGrory.

"To see me?" Sherwood feigned surprise.

"Well, you were doing it in a funny way, weren't you? You were going away from the house."

"Yes," said McGrory.

He was looking at Sherwood steadily, but there was something in his manner which aroused the other's interest. He was keeping something back, was obviously at a loss as to how to phrase the sentence in his mind. Sherwood decided to be mildly sarcastic.

"Do you always visit people by going away from their houses?" he asked. "If so, how do you ever see them?"

The jest sank into McGrory's thick skull and he grinned sheepishly.

"I didn't say I was coming to see you at the moment," he said, "what I said was that I had been coming to see you. But . . . er, I changed my mind."

"Well," said Sherwood, pleasantly, "what about changing your mind again and coming back with me to have a drink?"

"Not on your life," said McGrory.

Sherwood looked at him in silence for a moment, then he took him by the arm.

"Look here, what's up? What's the matter?" he spoke sharply.

McGrory grinned again.

"I haven't the slightest idea," he said, quietly, "all that I know is that I'm not going near your house at the moment. It's taken me the greater part of twenty-four hours to get rid of a couple of the Yard men who've been following me everywhere—at least I think they were Yard men. It's the only explanation for their presence that I can give. For my escape too: I must say at the time I thought my bolt was a bit too easy to be quite true; that the police had become a bit less efficient than they used to be the last time I was in quod. That fellow Lynton's a bit deeper than one thinks."

"Lynton?" said Sherwood, sharply.

"Yes: I'm pretty clear in my mind what happened now. He came to see me and began to talk about the fellow who had double-crossed me, and him too for that matter: the fellow

who had got away with the two thousand. Then I found the doors had been left open and I hopped it. Wasn't until some hours later when I was back in London that I realised I was being followed. I can see Lynton's idea now; he let me go, let me go on purpose because he knew I would be after the fellow who'd given me away, and he thought I might lead him to him. Not a bad idea, really. Only trouble is that a man with all the experience I've got isn't likely to fail to notice that he's being shadowed. I've got rid of them at last, for good, I've . . ."

"Look here," interrupted Sherwood, "it's all very well about that, but . . . why won't you come to my house?"

"Why?" said McGrory. "After all these hours that I've spent in getting rid of the two police? D'you think I want to walk into their hands again?"

"Eh?"

"Look here," said McGrory, slowly, "you've done me a good turn or two in the past, old man Vickers. I don't want you to run your head into a noose if you're in trouble. Your house is being watched, see? Watched, yes; and by the Yard, too. I know their men. I got a fleeting glimpse of a fellow as I was walking along, when I was quite near your house. It took me about ten minutes to get rid of him too, because he'd seen me. However, I did it eventually and then just to make quite sure that there wasn't a chance of meeting you I popped back, taking great care, as you can imagine.

There are a good many of them. I saw three and I should think there are more. The house is pretty well surrounded. What have you been doing, old man Vickers? Given up your old job and taken to the active side again?"

Sherwood did not reply for the moment; he was temporarily at a loss, a most unusual thing for him. Surely it couldn't have happened that the man had recovered consciousness so soon, the man he had assaulted in that car? Surely he couldn't have given information to the Yard already? He looked at his watch quickly: it was an hour since he had committed the deed and therefore possible that this had taken place . . . but Sherwood shook his head. It was unlikely. What other explanation could there be? Surely not that someone had broken in and discovered the truth about Vickers? Sherwood felt beads of perspiration gathering on his brow, a cold sweat which made him shiver with apprehension; but, then, almost at once, he was his old self again. His meeting with McGrory had been providential. He had been warned—his luck had not broken. He turned to the other; he must tell this man something, make up some story on the spur of the moment which would explain the matter to his satisfaction. What was more important—he must find somewhere to which he could go in order to change his identity once more.

For a moment Sherwood's shrewd eyes measured McGrory. Was it possible that this man was

to be his saviour in more ways than one? If he straightened himself up from the stooping posture which he had adopted in order to resemble Vickers, Sherwood knew he would be about the same size as McGrory. His quick brain was already planning his next action: the thing to do was to get McGrory's confidence, make the man take him to his lair where he could effect an entire change of clothes and personality. True, McGrory was wanted also, but wanted for burglary only. He, however, was wanted for something far worse, and he might be able to carry the plan to the bitter end and do the term of imprisonment that was certainly coming to McGrory; but to do this it would be necessary that he should use no make-up, and in a flash Sherwood realised that this scheme would not work. Shelter, however, was what he needed at that moment, shelter from the streets where at any time some passer-by might recognise him and give information—or worse still, one of the watchers might catch sight of him. He had nowhere to go. McGrory, no doubt, was staying somewhere. McGrory had come to see him. Possibly, in the guise of Vickers he might be of use to the man. He determined to pursue the idea.

“Look here, McGrory,” he said, quietly. “I’ve got an idea why the Yard is interested in me, but . . . well, we needn’t talk about that now, need we? But . . . I don’t like the situation at all. Tell me, why were you coming to see me?”

McGrory looked round.

"This isn't too safe a place to talk, is it?" he said, quietly.

The plan was coming Sherwood's way.

"No," he agreed, "but I can't take you back to the house. We'd both be in the soup then. Tell me, where are you hanging out?"

McGrory's little eyes narrowed; obviously he did not relish the idea of giving away his retreat even to a man whom he knew so well as Vickers. However, his desire to obtain the information which Vickers could give him was greater evidently than his caution, for after a momentary pause he made up his mind.

"Come along," he said, "but keep to the shadows."

"Trust me for that," said Sherwood, thankfully.

They walked a few paces together then suddenly McGrory stopped again.

"I think it would be just as well," he said, quietly, "if we didn't walk together. After all, we're both wanted by the police. It's a safeguard for each of us. I'll lead the way and you follow about twenty yards behind."

"Right," said Sherwood, smiling inwardly.

McGrory plan was reasonable up to a point, but it showed the state into which the man's nerves had fallen. Sherwood, having no nerves himself, felt a sort of contempt for a man who could be affected in this manner. He was wanted for a far more serious offence than was McGrory, yet he felt no pang of anxiety or

apprehension but trusted entirely to his own ability to extricate himself from any difficulty which might arise. Without protest, however, he fell in with McGrory's suggestion, waited until he had advanced some twenty paces and then followed him, keeping the interval.

For a quarter of an hour or more they walked, and Sherwood, with all his knowledge of London, realised that McGrory was taking him to a locality with which he was not familiar. At last the man stopped at a door in a mean, dark street and waited for Sherwood to catch up with him; then unlocking the door quickly with a key which he produced from his pocket, he held it open just long enough for Sherwood to pass through and closed it behind him. They were in darkness; McGrory struck a match and leading the way to a staircase which was opposite them, mounted to the second floor. Here he preceded Sherwood into a small room and lit a lamp on the table. By its rays Sherwood saw that they were in McGrory's bedroom, probably the only room which he rented. A table stood in the centre of the room, by which were two chairs, but apart from these and a washstand and bed, there was no other furniture, excepting bedraggled curtains and a threadbare carpet. Sherwood shivered involuntarily; he did not like discomfort.

McGrory pointed to a chair and Sherwood sat down. The other went to a cupboard from which he withdrew a bottle and two tin mugs. Placing one of these before Sherwood, McGrory

half filled it from the bottle, helped himself; then he replaced the bottle in the cupboard and sat down opposite his guest. Rather unexpectedly he grinned.

"Lucky my meeting you to-night, Vickers. Otherwise . . . well, where would you have been now, I wonder?"

Sherwood smiled.

"I wonder!" he reiterated non-committally.

"What were the cops after you for?"

Sherwood glanced up.

"That's got nothing to do with you, McGrory," he said, quietly but very firmly.

McGrory smiled.

"Made a slip, had you? Got rid of one of your purchases injudiciously? Well, I often wonder how you blokes manage to get away with it for as long as you do. You've had a long run, Vickers," he said reminiscently. "It must be some years since we've known each other."

"Yes, some years," said Sherwood quietly.

"And during that time I've brought you a lot of stuff that you've got rid of one way and another."

"One way and another," repeated Sherwood, with a smile.

"You must have made a pretty good profit out of me, you know," said McGrory, suddenly.

"Not so that you'd notice it."

"That's the sort of thing you would say," said McGrory, impatiently. "You fences get most of the profit and run half the risk."

Sherwood smiled superciliously.

"That's all you know about it, McGrory. We run just as much risk as you do though in a different way, and we don't get most of the profit."

"Oh, you all say the same," said McGrory. "Still, there's no use arguing about it. You're necessary, I suppose."

"Very necessary," said Sherwood, with a smile to himself.

There was a pause. Evidently McGrory was working up to his subject but did not know quite how to commence. Sherwood decided to help him.

"What was it you were coming to see me about this evening, McGrory?"

Even in the face of a direct question McGrory seemed to find difficulty in framing his words. At last, however, he leant forward, his elbows resting on the table, chin supported in his hands, and when he spoke his voice was very earnest.

"Listen, Vickers, you can help me a lot if you want to. To tell you the truth I doubt if I'd have got away from that prison in Brighton if it hadn't been that Scotland Yard wanted to get at a certain fellow. They knew very well that I wanted to get at him just as much, if not more. Well, I haven't been idle. It's taken me some time since I got free to shake off the attentions of these two fellows who were detailed off to look after me, but now that I have done so I've been having a look round, asking a few

fellows, friends, and I'm no nearer a solution to the mystery than I was before."

"What mystery?" asked Sherwood, sharply.

"I want to know who it was who gave away my plans to Scotland Yard. I want to know who it was who squealed on me, and by God when I find him I wouldn't like to be in his shoes."

"And why do you suppose," said Sherwood, quietly, "that I can tell you?"

"Because you know us all, Vickers. You've been going for a long time now, as I've just said. There must be very few of our lot who, in the course of those years, haven't been to you to dispose of something or other. And you know the secrets too. You're supposed to have a greater knowledge of our plans and ideas than anybody else down in these parts. That's true, isn't it?"

Sherwood shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be."

"Oh, none of your evasive stuff with me," said McGrory. "I know it as well as you do. Now listen. Somebody squealed on me, somebody gave away my plans to Scotland Yard, otherwise they were bound to be successful. Not content with that, this person took advantage of his squealing to make a good thing out of it for himself. He took no risks. He had me done in and my lot, but got away with the boodle, boodle which is mine, I say."

"Rather cleverly," interrupted Sherwood.

"I don't care how cleverly it was done," said

McGrory shortly. "The point is—he squealed. I wouldn't have minded being done in the eye so much if it hadn't been for that squealing. What's it meant? It's meant that all my lot are in gaol and will be for a year or two to come. It's meant that I'm hounded from corner to corner and that the moment I'm caught I've got a long period in front of me, and you know as well as I do, Vickers, that it's not so damn easy to get out of the way of the police once they're seriously looking for you. I want that man: I want to teach him that it isn't healthy to do that sort of thing. I came to you to ask if you would help."

Sherwood answered nothing. He leant back in his chair. It pleased him to gloat over the fantastic situation which had arisen. McGrory asking for information from the very man who had succeeded in thwarting his plans, who had got away with what McGrory fondly imagined was his very own swag! He allowed himself the pleasure of revelling in the situation for quite an appreciable space of time, but then suddenly he lowered his eyes and stared straight at the other.

"And what if I do help you?"

"You can, then?"

McGrory's voice was eager.

"And what if I do help you?" repeated Sherwood, impassively.

"Listen," said McGrory. "Some blighter, the same man I should think, went to my home when I was in prison and robbed me of every-

thing I had. But I'm not such a fool as he evidently thought me. I don't keep everything that I possess in one place. I can pay for the information as long as it's accurate."

"It will be accurate all right," said Sherwood, quietly.

"Very well. What's your price?"

"You're asking me to do a very serious thing," said Sherwood, suavely. "You're asking me to give away somebody else."

"God!" cried McGrory, "do you hesitate to do that when the man you are going to give away has done what he has done to me, has squealed to the Yard about my movements and then taken advantage of it?"

"I don't hesitate to do that," said Sherwood, quietly. "I'll give you absolutely accurate information. I'll give you the name of the man and his address and I'll tell you when he's likely to be at home, but . . . at a price and . . . on one condition."

"What's the price?" growled McGrory, "and what's the condition?"

"The condition comes first," said Sherwood quietly; "it's that you will not molest this man until after six o'clock to-morrow morning. After that you may do what you will . . . but I've got a little matter to settle with him before you visit him. The price is two hundred pounds down . . . now . . . in cash."

McGrory threw back his head and laughed.

"And cheap at the price," he cried. "I'll agree, Vickers; but no double-crossing, mind!"

When you settle your business with him, which I suppose you're going to do, there's to be no warning him that I'm to come."

"I give you my word of honour," said Sherwood, serenely.

For a moment McGrory looked at him doubtfully.

"That's a bet then?"

"Yes, that's a bet."

"Who . . . who is it?"

"Cash first, please."

Once again McGrory looked at Sherwood through narrowed eyes, but evidently he decided to trust the old man Vickers whom he had known so long.

"Get out of this room for a minute," he said, gruffly.

Sherwood obeyed, went through the door, closed it behind him and waited until he heard McGrory's voice calling him to enter. He did so and saw McGrory seated once more at the table, and as Sherwood came in he counted out the money, which the other took and placed in an inside pocket.

"Not until six o'clock this morning, in about four hours from now, remember!"

"That's all right," said McGrory. "I could do with a little sleep."

"Right," Sherwood smiled. "The man for whom you are looking can be found at this address."

He took a piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket and deliberately wrote down the name

of the man whom he had so recently known as his chief, together with the address at which he might be found.

All the better that two of the men whom he wanted out of the way, who were after his life and liberty, should fight it out between them.

I HAVE previously related in this record of my activities, the facts about a certain occasion which gave me great cause for irritation ; but I have never been so annoyed as at the moment of sitting down to write this. I affirm now, without any fear of over-stating the case, that the annoyance which I suffered on that previous occasion is as nothing to that which I feel at the moment. Then I had to report a failure, and although I have not turned back these pages to confirm it, I seem to remember having wondered whether I was still in possession of all those faculties which have, in the past, enabled me to rise to my present position. I am now faced with the bitter necessity of having to record my second failure, and not only my second failure, but the second in succession, which makes it ever so much worse. I was fooled before—I have been fooled again, and not only fooled but I have lost one of the most valuable members of my band. The only retrieving feature is that the man undoubtedly remained faithful to me.

In the previous instance I was fooled because I trusted one of my followers who proved unfaithful. In this case my satellite, who is alluded to in this record by the numeral Three, was obviously carrying out his instructions, but he was betrayed in some

way—of that I am certain. May God grant that I find out how. There seems to be a fate against me now : luck has definitely turned and the sooner I clear out on what I have made, the better. The whole plan was so simple, so beautifully simple. It should have worked. I still don't quite understand what happened to prevent success.

Earlier in this record I have given an account of Weight's plans. I will take it up from the moment when Three should have stepped into the car. As a matter of fact the excellent fellow did : it was afterwards that something happened to him, something which I will go on to relate in its proper place. Weight's plan was clever : the idea of having a man practising the throwing of a packet of precisely the same weight as the necklace known as "The Seventy Sapphires" was famed to be, from a balcony to a car a certain distance away from it, was certainly most ingenious, and Weight was lucky enough to have, among his men, a man who could do this, a man sufficiently dexterous to be able to train himself to accomplish this feat so that there was practically no chance of failure. I decided to profit by this man's dexterity.

I told off Three, my most trusted follower since that rascal Sherwood left me, to get in touch with the man whom Weight had detailed to drive the car. He had certain instructions which, if properly carried out, would leave him in control of the car with the original driver concealed in the back quite powerless further to interfere with the evening's operations. I surmise that these orders were duly followed and that at the appointed time Three

drove the car very slowly up Park Lane to the house. Just as he reached it, according to both Weight's and my own plan, the lights went out. A second or two later a man appeared on the balcony, saw the car and threw the packet, which I assume was so well thrown that it landed on the seat beside the driver. I don't suppose Three bothered to pick it up and place it in his pocket at that moment ; probably he merely put his foot on the accelerator and disappeared from the locality as rapidly as the car would take him and the traffic allow. This was still in entire accordance with my plan ; but then something must have happened.

I was waiting here for the appearance of Three, who had been told to take the necklace straight to that old rogue Vickers, to obtain the two thousand from him in cash in exchange for it, and to bring me the money after he had disposed of the car and its uninterested occupant. I waited for some time ; if the truth had been known, for longer than my patience lasted. I had a premonition that something had gone wrong, a feeling that my plans were not working out right and that the ill luck which is beginning to dog me had put yet another spoke in my wheel.

I was not wrong. Three never turned up. When he was more than an hour overdue I dispatched Five, who was with me, to make investigations and he has just returned with his report. Something very odd, unfortunately, has happened. Three is lying unconscious in some hospital at the moment, and is, I believe, unlikely to recover. The car is in the hands of the police, the necklace has vanished,

and the dead body of the man who should have been driving the car is in some mortuary. If the car had merely suffered some accident I could have understood it, for Three had instructions to proceed as fast as possible, but no such mishap had occurred. It was in perfectly good running order, in fact the engine was still turning over smoothly enough when the car was discovered by some late reveller who immediately informed the police.

I confess that from the thoroughly selfish point of view I should like Three to recover consciousness, for I should like to hear what he has to say. Who it was who attacked him, for instance? From the unselfish standpoint, however, I suppose I ought to hope that he never comes out of the stupor in which he now lies; it is better for him undoubtedly that he should die at once than that he should linger merely to take a short walk to the gallows one morning . . . for that is obviously the fate in store for him should he recover. The dead body in the back of the car is gruesome evidence—and evidence enough. But it is a mystery, a mystery which I cannot fathom and I would give a great deal to be able to solve it. Why did he stop his car in that place just beside the Guards Memorial? Out of his way really, out of the direct route anyway from Park Lane to the house of old Vickers. Why should he have gone there at all, far less stop the car? I don't understand it, not one little bit, but I should like to say here that I regret the loss of Three's help in future activities far more than I regret the tangible value of the necklace which has gone astray. I would give all my fortune to be able

to discover who is dogging my footsteps, spoiling all my plans. Surely not Sherwood again?

It's very late, or perhaps I should say, early in the morning, but I cannot go to bed. My mind is too upset, my thoughts too chaotic for them to quieten down and give me the chance of sleep, but out of the turmoil in my brain one thing resolves itself definitely. I have made a great deal from my work and can well afford to retire and live in comfort. I can do this with a perfectly calm mind for I know very well that no one has any notion of my little efforts; I have left no clue behind me which might lead later to my detection. In fact, I may claim that Scotland Yard knows nothing even of my existence.

To-morrow morning I shall set about winding up my affairs. Five, the only man who is left to me, has been faithful all through. I will pay him off handsomely, after that he can do what he likes. If he cares to go straight—as I shall—well, he won't want for money. But I will retain his services for just a little longer. There is one thing in which I am determined to succeed before finally I leave the underworld—the settling of my account with Ben Sherwood. His defection has been a still more bitter pill to swallow, as I liked him perhaps the best of all my men. I have heard it said that there is no fury like that of a woman scorned. I would like to add to that assertion: I would say that there will be no fury comparable to mine if ever I get hold of the man who betrayed my trust. Sherwood must die, and more than that—he must die slowly. He must be made to suffer just as he

has made me suffer, and I look forward to hearing his shrieks of anguish as life fades gradually, so gradually, out of him. I write this in cold blood. I mean every word that I say. To my reader it may sound dramatic . . . but it is written in no such spirit. The man will be made to pay.

I fully realise that Sherwood will not be an easy customer to trace. His remarkable abilities, his amazing talent for impersonating other people in clothes, speech and even idiosyncrasies, make him a most elusive individual. It is just possible, however, that he may be the cause, not only of my failure this evening, but also of the tragic fate which has overcome Three, in which case he will have to dispose of "The Seventy Sapphires" if they are in his possession. What more likely than that he should go to Vickers, prince of receivers, a man with whom I know he is acquainted? Vickers is not too scrupulous; Vickers has been the means of giving information to Scotland Yard which I desired them to obtain. Vickers, no doubt, will supply me—at a price—with information about Sherwood. To-morrow morning, then, I will go to Vickers. He will be surprised to see me, perhaps. He expected to see my representative to-night with the necklace. I think he will be prepared to give me the knowledge I want; will tell me whether Sherwood has already brought him the jewels; in which case, after hearing my tale, he will not want to touch them. Vickers is wise; he refuses to touch any goods of that sort over which a murder has been committed—that is, if the connection between the two is known to the police.

I have been very useful to Vickers ; very useful indeed. He has also been of help to me, but I think the account leaves him still in my debt. I feel better now that I have decided. I will go to Vickers early to-morrow morning. I will find out what I can, and with any luck at all shall be hot on the trail of Sherwood by to-morrow night. Then, perhaps, when the hands of the clock have again reached the position to which they are pointing now—I may be revenged. If that is so . . . the boat train and no more anxiety.

Yes, my mind is at rest now. I will try to get some sleep.

"Got any beer?" suddenly asked Lynton.

He was sitting in Hurst's room in Scotland Yard, waiting for a report from the Inspector in charge of the men who, at that moment, were keeping such a vigilant look-out round the house of old man Vickers. Lynton had reluctantly decided against taking charge himself, for he realised that Sherwood knew him by sight, and should any mischance occur and the man catch a glimpse of him, it would be quite sufficient to frighten him away from the house for good. As far as possible the men who were lounging so unobtrusively round the old receiver's home had been chosen because it was unlikely that Sherwood knew them to be police officers. Hurst had work of his own to do, although the case of "The Seventy Sapphires" was now in Lynton's charge more than his, since the connection between the two cases had been definitely established by that fleeting glimpse of the man in Park Lane, purporting to be the dead receiver. Hurst, therefore, had consented to remain in wait with Lynton in order to be on the spot should his help be required.

"Beer?" said Hurst. "No. Wish I had. Be a good idea, now, wouldn't it?"

Lynton rose to his feet and lit a cigarette.

"Pity you haven't any beer," he said. "We'll have to use some of mine. I'll go and get it."

Hurst grinned to himself as the young man left the room. He was older than Lynton and his service in the force was longer, yet in no way did he grudge the young man his quick promotion. Lynton had the happy knack of never appearing superior to the others and he had been correspondingly popular since he never manifested the slightest signs of conceit. In common with all the other Inspectors in the Yard, Hurst longed almost passionately that Lynton should bring his case to a successful conclusion and so rehabilitate himself in the eyes of Superintendent Tudor.

In a very few minutes the young man was back, carrying two glasses and two bottles of lager.

"Thanks, old man," smiled Hurst.

The nerves of both the men were over-strained. The news for which they hoped was important, immensely important. Were Sherwood caught that night on his way to the old informer's house, the case would be practically finished. They had irrefutable evidence against the man; such a capture would be a tremendous triumph for them both. In spite of their cheery talk and apparent indifference, the suspense was trying them pretty keenly, so the beer was welcome and helped considerably to steady their nerves.

"No news from the hospital yet, I suppose?" suddenly asked Lynton, after a long pause.

"We rang up a short time ago," answered Hurst. "The man was still unconscious. I spoke to the doctor and he said he seemed likely to remain unconscious for some time, if, indeed, he ever recovers. He was hit pretty hard. It may be a case of double murder against some person or persons unknown."

"Still, I don't know," said Lynton, slowly. "The probability is, after all, that the man who's lying unconscious in that hospital was the man who killed the poor devil found in the back of the car. I dare say he'll be lucky, perhaps, if he does die before regaining consciousness—but I hope to God he doesn't. He may be able to give us information. I wish to heaven we'd some idea who he is. Must be connected with some gang, I suppose. Curious how these gangs are preying on each other at the moment, isn't it? They talk about 'honour among thieves'. Well, we haven't noticed much of it lately."

"No," said Hurst, slowly, "but it exists all right, Lynton, as you know as well as I. It's usually very hard to get a fellow to squeal on another. I don't quite understand it. I'm inclined to think that it's all done by one lot, the lot of which this man Sherwood is a member. Wonder who the devil's at the head of that gang? He's a cute boy, he is, whoever he may be."

Hurst looked up, rather surprised that he had received no reply, but he at once saw the reason. There was a curious light shining in Lynton's eyes, the light of excitement. Evidently he had

had an idea and was considering it. Suddenly he turned to his friend.

"My gosh!" he cried. "I wonder if she could do it."

"She?" said Hurst, surprised. "Could do it! Who could do what?"

"Listen, Hurst. You know that girl, Estelle Desmond? On her own confession she was a member of McGrory's gang. On her own confession she knew Sherwood, and she knows that he was a member of another gang, the gang, presumably, who are preying on their fellow-criminals. Well, in a sense, this case of 'The Seventy Sapphires' is very similar to that in which I got fooled up so badly. You see, Weight's man was killed and was hidden away in that car. It's possible, in view of the method by which the necklace was removed, that that was part of the original plan. Not the killing of the fellow, but the other fellow taking his place, the fellow who's a member of . . . shall we say, the Preying Gang for want of a better name? Well, the similarity between the two cases is obvious: one gang has preyed upon the other, using the plans of the first gang just so far as it suited them. If I'm right, it's possible that Miss Desmond may know this fellow who's lying unconscious in hospital. She may have met him with Sherwood or something. If she could definitely tell us that this is so . . . well, it's something to go on, anyway, even if the man doesn't recover, and it's something to use on questioning him if he does."

For a moment Hurst did not reply. He stared at his desk, deep in thought; then suddenly he looked up.

"Yes, John, yes; that's a good idea, and the sooner it's carried out the better. We don't want to give the girl a fright right away, no more than we can help. It's no pleasant thing to identify a dead man. Much better that she should go to that hospital now."

"At this time of night?" cried Lynton, quickly.

"Why not? The man's still alive. It would be better to identify him now, I think, than . . . well, if anything goes wrong later. What do you say?"

Lynton paused before replying. The force of his friend's argument struck him convincingly.

"Could we get hold of her?" asked Hurst.

"Oh, easily enough."

Lynton had made up his mind. It was obviously a sound idea and also it gave them something to do during this anxious vigil which seemed unending. He went to the telephone and gave the number of his lodgings. A few moments elapsed, but there came no reply; instead he was informed by a curt voice from the exchange that there was no answer.

"I know there's someone there," said Lynton, quickly. "Please keep on ringing. They're probably asleep."

A few minutes later a sleepy, querulous voice called out:

"Hallo! Who's there?"

"Inspector Lynton speaking, Mrs. Stokes. I'm so sorry to worry you at this time of night, but I'm afraid it's desperately important. Do you know if Miss Desmond's gone to bed yet?"

It was in a somewhat more agreeable tone that his housekeeper answered.

"Yes, sir. Gone an hour and more."

"Oh, that's a pity. Well, would you mind telling her that I'm extremely sorry to have to disturb her, but I should be very much obliged if she would dress quickly and come along here. I want her help about something. I'll send a car along at once. Will you do that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll go and tell her at once."

"Right. Thanks very much. Good-night."

Lynton rang off and turned to his friend, a rueful smile on his face.

"Afraid I've annoyed the old landlady," he laughed, "spoiled her beauty sleep. Anyway, it's in a good cause—and she's not got much to spoil."

He pressed the bell and instructed the policeman who answered it to have a car sent round to fetch Miss Desmond. Just as the man left the room the telephone bell rang. Hurst lifted the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"Is that Inspector Lynton?" came a voice.

"Just a moment," said Hurst, and handed the receiver to his friend.

"Inspector Lynton speaking. Who's that?"

"Inspector Tompkins, sir. Inspector in charge. One of my men has just reported that

he caught sight of McGrory approaching the house a few minutes ago ; followed him, but the fellow must have suspected something and gave him the slip. I shouldn't think he'd come back now, sir. Or anyone else, for that matter. Rather think McGrory must have done in old Vickers. Anyway, d'you think it's much good for us all to stay here, sir ? I was wondering whether to dismiss one or two of the men. What d'you think ? ”

“ Just a moment,” said Lynton shortly. “ Hang on.”

He turned to Hurst and told him what the Inspector had said.

“ Rather looks as though it was McGrory, all right,” said Hurst soberly. “ I'm afraid we're not in luck, old chap.”

“ No,” said Lynton, in a disappointed tone, “ doesn't seem like it, I must say. Anyway, I don't think there's much use in all those men staying, do you ? Better get Tompkins to pack up and leave two men to keep a look-out in case anyone should come back, but . . . I'm afraid the odds are against it.”

He lifted the receiver once more.

“ You there, Tompkins ? Yes, I think you'd better pack up now. Leave two men to keep a watch on the house and if anyone comes one man is to let us know immediately, the other to arrest whoever arrives. And he's not to let the person escape this time. It's a very bad business, Tompkins, letting McGrory get away. Quite clear ? ”

"Yes, sir," came the reply, and Lynton replaced the receiver.

"It's the most abominable luck," he said, turning to Hurst, "losing McGrory again like that. Either he's got a marvellous knack of giving our men the slip or else . . . the whole force is getting inefficient. A bit of both, I'm afraid! I wonder what on earth McGrory was doing round the old man's house? Somehow I don't believe he killed Vickers. Can't see any reason for it, unless he thought the old chap gave him away to us."

"Well," broke in Hurst, "he wasn't far wrong, either, was he? It most certainly was through Vickers that we got on his track."

"That's true," agreed Lynton, "but Vickers received his information from someone else who told him to warn the Yard. That's the fellow whom McGrory would want to get. Anyway, the only thing we can do now is to keep the house watched and redouble our efforts to get hold of McGrory. We know he's still in London—that's some help. You'd better get your men to have another search in all his pet hiding-places to see if we can't land the fellow. That would be something, anyway. Oh, Lord, if *only* they hadn't been such fools and let him slip through their fingers again."

He stopped, disappointment clouding his face, and Hurst looked at him with sympathy. It was certainly very bad luck; at one moment they had seemed to be on the point of success, a success which meant so much more for Lynton

than for himself even. Hurst fully realised that the young Inspector's whole future career hung in the balance, and although he was feeling very much annoyed at the sudden dashing of his hopes he did his best to cheer his friend.

"We'll get him all right," he said, reassuringly, "don't you worry, John. That fellow was a fool, letting him go like that; but, anyway, they're not all fools in the force, and the third time's lucky, remember. He won't——"

But at this moment his words were interrupted. There was a knock on the door, and a policeman entered.

"We've just brought Miss Desmond round, sir. She's waiting outside in the car."

"Good lord," cried Lynton, cheering up instantly, "I'd forgotten all about her. She may be able to do us some good. I'll go along with her now, Hurst. You'll stay here, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Hurst. "I'm expecting reports from the men who're combing out McGrory's haunts, and I'll tell them to redouble their efforts, particularly round about the neighbourhood of the old man's house. Will you be coming back?"

"Yes," said Lynton. "I'll be along later to let you know what happens, and see if there's any further news. Well, so long, old man."

"Good luck," said Hurst, and with a parting smile Lynton hastened from the room.

He walked rapidly along the corridor and down

some steps to the street, where, drawn up by the kerb, a car was waiting. Inside, looking very pale and worried, sat Estelle. After telling the chauffeur to drive quickly to the hospital, Lynton opened the door and sat down beside her. She was looking at him rather nervously. He smiled reassuringly.

"I'm so sorry to worry you like this, Miss Desmond," he said pleasantly, "but I need your help pretty badly. There's a man in hospital whom we thought you might be able to identify. He's unconscious and may die at any moment, so we thought it would be better if you came along now. It's a gruesome business, identifying dead people."

Estelle seemed much relieved; evidently she had been very startled by this urgent night summons to the Yard. She still looked puzzled, however, and asked:

"I'll do all I can, of course. But what makes you think I know the man?"

In a few words Lynton told her all that had happened; the disappearance of "The Seventy Sapphires"; his discovery of the dead body of Vickers; his suspicion that Sherwood was now masquerading as the dead man; and the finding of that tragic car near the Guards Memorial. She listened to him in silence, but her face was very white. Just as he came to the end of his tale the car stopped. They had reached the hospital.

Lynton helped Estelle from the car and led the way to the ward in which the man had been

placed. In a few words he explained his business to the nurse in charge and asked whether the man had as yet recovered consciousness.

"No," she replied, "and I'm afraid there isn't much hope now. Perhaps you'd better see him at once."

They followed her down the ward until they reached a screen, behind which a bed supported a livid-faced man, swathed in bandages. Estelle went even whiter as she approached the recumbent figure, but bending down she examined very carefully what could be seen of his features; then, rising, she turned to Lynton.

"No," she whispered, "I've never seen him before."

The Inspector looked very disappointed. He thanked the nurse and led the way out of the ward. Once outside, however, he turned to the girl again.

"You're quite sure, aren't you, Miss Desmond? It's a bit difficult to recognise anyone under all those bandages. You don't think you might be making a mistake?"

"No." Estelle spoke with absolute certainty. "No, I'm sorry, Inspector, but I'm quite sure that I've never laid my eyes on the man before. He certainly wasn't a member of McGrory's gang, at least, not while I was with them. And I've never seen him with Sherwood either."

"Very well, it can't be helped. Thanks ever so much, anyway, Miss Desmond. I'm afraid I've spoilt your night's rest uselessly."

They had now reached the car, into which

Estelle was just about to enter, when Lynton suddenly stopped her.

"What about walking back, Miss Desmond," he suggested. "That is, if you're not too tired. I could do with a bit of fresh air, and it's turned out such a perfect night. Shall we?"

"I'd love to," agreed Estelle. She slipped out of the car, which Lynton dismissed immediately, and they began to walk quickly along the empty streets.

The night, as Lynton had said, was indeed perfect. The rain had ceased for some time now, the wind had dropped and stars studded the inky-black sky. A crescent moon was peeping shyly from under a drifting cloud, shedding its wistful illumination on the deserted buildings, moulding them with shadows into bizarre, unreal shapes. And in this romantic setting the two walked along gaily, delighting in each other's company; Estelle, her fears forgotten, chatting happily to this man whom she knew to be her friend, although they had known each other for so short a time.

"I'll just go back to the Yard a moment, to let old Hurst know what's happened, and then we'll go home together. By the way, how do you like old Mrs. Stokes?"

Estelle laughed.

"Very much," she said. "Only I don't think she was over-pleased at being woken up in the middle of the night! Still, she's a nice old thing, really. I think I shall stay on afterwards—when I'm free to start my job, I mean. That

is"—she looked up enquiringly at the young Inspector, a roguish twinkle in her eyes—"if you wouldn't mind?"

"Mind," he cried. "Mind? Why, it'll be splendid, Miss—oh, dash it all—Estelle! 'Miss Desmond' sounds so beastly formal, doesn't it? Don't you think that . . ."

Lynton suddenly broke off; he seized the girl by the arm and drew her quickly into the shadows of a doorway.

"Good God," he whispered. "Did you see him?"

"See who?"

The girl did not raise her voice above a whisper.

"McGrory."

The single word filled Estelle's heart with fear; this was only momentary, however. She felt safe in the companionship of this young police officer, as though protected by his mere presence. The sensation was comforting and distinctly novel; it was a very long time since she had felt in any way reassured by another's society, a very long time since she had relied on anyone other than herself. With renewed confidence she turned to Lynton and whispered softly:

"Where is he?"

Lynton did not answer. He was thinking furiously, his brain working faster than it had worked for some while. Here was a chance, a chance he could not afford to miss; yet could he leave Estelle alone in the streets to make her own way home at that time in the morning?

There was no choice. The more he considered it the more Lynton realised that it was his bounden duty to follow McGrory and capture him. He made up his mind on the instant. Putting his lips very close to her ear he whispered :

"Look here, Estelle. You've got to find your own way home. I'm very sorry, but I must take this chance. I'm after McGrory."

The girl never hesitated.

"All right," she said quietly. "Don't you worry about me."

Somehow her attitude helped him immeasurably ; it was so matter-of-fact, which was just what he wanted it to be at the moment.

"Good. But straight home, mind !"

Without another word, Lynton slipped away. She watched him for a few moments and marvelled at the skill with which he moved rapidly and silently, taking advantage of every shadow cast by the houses, which seemed to be there to help him. A figure was at the other end of the street, which, now it had been pointed out, she recognised as that of McGrory. It vanished from sight round a corner. The moment it had gone Lynton dashed to the corner. He was debating within himself whether to accost McGrory and arrest him on the spot ; but he didn't quite like to. There must be no chance of failure this time ; even if McGrory had not actually murdered Vickers he was probably implicated in some way. Otherwise, why on earth should he have been near the old man's house earlier that night ? In any case he was almost

certain to be armed, and Lynton knew well enough that he was a tough customer and would fight hard for his freedom.

"No," said Lynton to himself, "I think I'll let him lead and just keep him in sight until I can get help. Anyway, I wonder where you're going, old fellow? It's a curious hour for you to be out. On a job by any chance?"

The young man's eyes gleamed with excitement.

"I wonder if I've got another hunch? I wonder if this lad is leading me somewhere where I want to go." He laughed gaily to himself.

"A little freedom's a damned dangerous thing."

It was with a sigh of relief that Ben Sherwood saw the door opening to him and slipped into the house. 'It was immediately closed again, but the dark shape which had shut it did not move.'

"What the devil do you want, Vickers?" came a gruff voice from the blackness.

Sherwood laughed, not the quavering laugh of the wheezy old man, but his own jolly expression of mirth. He saw the other start in astonishment.

"Good God!"

"Yes," said Sherwood, pleasantly, in his own voice. "It's me, Ben Sherwood, all right."

A note of doubt, of suspicion, crept into the other's voice as he answered.

"Well, and what do you want, anyway?"

"Now, listen," said Sherwood. "I'm not going to bother you much. All I want is the use of a room for half an hour. I came here because I didn't think you'd begrudge me this after . . ."

The other laid a hand on his arm.

"Quiet," he said. "My wife's upstairs and she may be listening." He spoke very low.

"All right. Come in here."

He led the way through a door and Sherwood found himself in a small room which, in the

daytime, was probably used as a dining-room. His host closed the door and lit a lamp on the table. Sherwood sat down in a chair and stretched himself. It was a great relief no longer to keep up the cramped attitude which went with the part of old man Vickers, and he was thankful to be rid of that guise for ever. Yet he felt grateful to the clothes he was wearing at that moment, which had enabled him to sink his own personality at a time when it had been so necessary. But he hadn't a second to waste ; placing a parcel which he had been carrying under his arm on the table, Sherwood looked up at the other man, who had been standing staring at him sullenly without speaking.

"Sorry to intrude upon your privacy, old chap," said Sherwood, quietly, "but to tell you the truth there was nowhere else to go."

"So you've brought the cops after you to me, have you ?"

The voice was vicious ; Ben Sherwood laughed.

"Not on your life. I'm not such a fool as all that, Bob. The cops are looking for me all right. I'll own that much, but they don't know where I am and they aren't anywhere near me at the moment. On the other hand, I had to find some place where I could cast these clothes, and in view of the fact that I was pretty useful to you just about a year ago, I thought you wouldn't mind giving me the use of one room. About half an hour, that's all I want it for."

"All right," said the other, ungraciously,

"but get on with it. What do you want to be alone here for?"

"That's nothing to do with you," said Sherwood, definitely. "I'm not going to take anything, if that's what you're afraid of." He laughed gaily. Somehow, in shedding the character of Vickers, his spirits had risen irresistibly. "But I want a little privacy. I don't approve of undressing and dressing in front even of male friends; it isn't nice." He grinned broadly and winked an eye. "No, out you go, Bob, and don't bother to come down to let me out. I'm going just as soon as I can get changed."

His unwilling host leant forward over the table.

"Are they so close on your heels as that, Ben, that you've been run to ground to change?"

He spoke earnestly. There was something, a note of fear, perhaps, in his voice.

"You needn't worry one spot for your skin," said Sherwood, rather disgustedly. "I tell you they don't know, not a soul knows, where I am at the moment, not to within three miles. In London is about as accurate a description as anyone could give of my whereabouts. But I'll acknowledge that I've got to get out of the part of old Vickers. I'll tell you exactly what I'm going to do. In that parcel there are clothes and props that I need for my new character. Sherwood is wanted, and Vickers," he laughed grimly, "well, Vickers is not a healthy part to play at the moment. So I'm going to be

somebody else, see? I shall stay in this room just long enough to change and just long enough to burn these clothes which I'm wearing now, in that grate. Then I'm off, and I dare say you'll think it a good riddance." He laughed again. "I shan't worry you again, Bob. It isn't much to ask of you, you know."

"Aren't I giving you what you want?" said the other curtly.

"Yes," said Sherwood, smiling, "but not in that grand manner of generosity which I expected. I don't somehow feel that you, as my host, are going to tell me in half a second's time to make this house my own and stay as long as I want." He laughed again. "But I don't mind, my lad. You get out. You're wasting my time. Go on, at once."

He advanced on the other and almost pushed him out of the door, shutting it. Immediately, however, he reopened it and called softly :

"And don't wait up for me."

Then, closing it again, he smiled to himself. Bob Tarrant was a good fellow, really, and for his own sake would keep his mouth shut about this nocturnal visit. Sherwood knew far too much about him to fear any double-dealing in this case. But he had wasted enough time already. Quickly, with the rapidity born of long practice, he removed all traces of old man Vickers from his person. He stuffed everything into the empty fireplace; clothes, wigs and towel with which he had cleaned the make-up from his face. Then, taking a bottle from the parcel

which now lay open on the table, he sprinkled all these objects with the fluid inside and applied a match to them. Standing up he watched the result of his handiwork; in less than a minute only ashes remained in the fireplace of the semblance of old man Vickers. Very quickly Sherwood donned the clothes which were lying on the table. They were clothes which he had skilfully purloined from McGrory's room; clothes which belonged to McGrory. In a few moments, excepting for face and head, he was the image of the man he intended to impersonate. Then, propping a small mirror in front of him, Sherwood set to work on the most difficult part of the whole affair. His fingers moved with incredible dexterity and speed, and his face seemed to change as he watched it in the glass. Very carefully he worked in the slight scar on the right temple which McGrory was bound to wear for evermore as the result of an affray in Glasgow, and then he quickly made a mixture of some lightly-coloured grease and powder which he rubbed into his hair. In a few moments it appeared a much lighter shade than before and was, indeed, very much the colour of McGrory's.

Sherwood leant back in his chair and examined himself critically. He smiled at his reflection in the glass.

"You haven't lost your art, have you, Ben, old boy? And it's just as well, for on that art depends your life—and don't forget it."

A few finishing touches here and there and

quickly he packed his greases and paints into the small box which he invariably carried in an inner pocket, ready for instant use if necessary. Rising to his feet, for a few moments he practised walking up and down the room, carefully memorising and putting into action all the mannerisms which he had noted so carefully in McGrory. Satisfied at last, he destroyed the paper which had covered all these essential units to his disguise, by burning it in the grate. He then slipped the vicious knife, his ever-present companion, into his pocket and added to it a little automatic, which he had also removed from McGrory's room, and opening the door hastened down the passage and thence from the house.

He moved silently but very quickly, keeping as much to the shadows as he could, and smiled to himself as he walked. He felt an unaccountable lightness of heart at being forced no longer to stoop and walk in the crouched attitude which had been necessary during his impersonation of old man Vickers; and he would have whistled had he dared. In no way must he attract attention. There was a risk in thus walking the streets as McGrory; he knew that arrest would be fatal for the very reasons which had occurred to him at first, when the idea had originally dawned on him when he had met McGrory. It was the fact that he would have to use make-up all during the period of his imprisonment—were he caught and assumed to be McGrory—that had made Sherwood realise

the futility of such a plan. It would be quite impossible to hide his identity for long, therefore he had relinquished the thought—the risk was too great. But this very temporary usurpation of the other's likeness was different; it was a risk well worth the taking. He had not made that condition with McGrory out of a whim, that condition which prevented the other from going to see the chief for four hours. That had been a necessary item in Sherwood's plan.

At the thought of McGrory he realised with renewed force that the danger he ran was indeed great, yet his lightness of heart was in no way impaired.

"Chaps who don't take risks," Sherwood said to himself, "are chaps who don't succeed; and besides if all goes well I shall be out of this character again in about an hour's time. Who I shall be then God only knows. A nice, smart man about town, with a small moustache, rather appeals to me, except that it tickles the nose a bit. Still, moustaches do alter faces; I don't think it would be a bad idea. However, for the moment, don't let's worry. Money is what we want, Ben, isn't it, and money is what we're going to get. Chief, you're in for a big surprise."

He grinned to himself in the darkness. The thought was pleasant. He walked quickly, but dared not make use of any mechanical means of reaching his destination. Once again it was essential that he should avoid as much as possible any chance of being traced, and he knew well

enough that his two flat feet were the safest means of travel.

"It's your busy night, Ben, isn't it?" He laughed. "I should think you've walked quite a considerable way since supper-time last night. Still, those who are not industrious don't succeed. Go on, Ben, my hearty, redouble your speed. Remember the sooner there the sooner away, and the sooner away the sooner out of this rather unpleasant and dangerous personality."

He was mightily pleased with himself, was Ben Sherwood, and a swagger crept into his carriage which was dismissed on the instant. He knew it to be out of keeping with the character of McGrory and he was far too great an artist to take any risks he could avoid. His rapid progression was bringing him ever nearer to his goal, and as he approached the locality of the chief's house he redoubled his precautions. The quarter he now traversed was much more fashionable than that he had left, yet although in one way this was an advantage, for the city seemed to be sleeping the sleep of the just and the streets were deserted, in another it increased his difficulties. Prowling policemen were liable to be met unexpectedly round any corner, and Sherwood was under no delusions that the description of McGrory had been circulated throughout the force. Such an encounter would be a disaster and he was very wary whenever he approached a side street, avoiding also all the main thoroughfares. Although this delayed him slightly he knew it to be well worth while.

At last, however, he found himself in sight of the well-remembered house wherein dwelt the chief. Not for one moment did Sherwood fear that he might fail to gain admittance. He approached boldly the front door to the block of flats, to which he fitted a key which he drew from a pocket. Very silently it opened and Sherwood closed the door noiselessly behind him. He grinned to himself, feeling pleased that he had retained the key which the chief had given him when he had joined his gang. Then, quickly he made his way in the darkness, quite sure of his direction from the many previous times that he had entered at dead of night. He moved to a door opposite, the door of the ground floor flat, and rang quickly, three short rings—a pause—one long one.

Sherwood stood back so as to be out of the way of the rays of light which would come when the door was opened. He knew that the bell rang at the bedside of the chief, so that even if the man were asleep he would be awakened and assume that one of his band demanded admission on some urgent matter. In his pocket Sherwood's fingers closed on the butt of his automatic. He heard footsteps approaching and saw the door open and a crack of light appear. In a flash he was through the door, had closed it with his left hand and with his right pushed the automatic into the ribs of the astonished man opposite him.

"No noise," said Sherwood, in a perfect imitation of the voice of McGrory. "No noise

or you go just where you belong. Put your hands up."

With a set face and very reluctantly the man did as he was told. Sherwood ran his left hand rapidly over the other's pockets, more in pretence than as a precaution, for he knew exactly where the chief kept his weapon. He feigned to find this unexpectedly, however, and quickly removed it to his own pocket.

"Right," he said. "About turn."

Glowering inwardly, the man whom Sherwood had for so long looked up to as his leader, turned and moved into the lighted study, which apparently he had just left, the muzzle of the other's automatic being pushed into the small of his back all the while. Papers were lying on a desk and a pen, obviously just discarded, lay beside them. Sherwood, however, wasted no time in looking about him. He knew the room well enough already.

"Stand by that wall," he said, "and keep your hands above your head. Right."

Keeping his eye the whole time on his victim and his automatic pointed unswervingly in his direction, so that at the slightest movement he could carry out his threat if necessary, Sherwood moved over to a chair, a particularly comfortable one, and sat down, crossing his legs. He was giving a magnificent imitation of how McGrory might be expected to behave; McGrory of the slums of Glasgow, arrogant and bullying in his power.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Only that I scarcely expected a visit from you to-night, McGrory."

An unwilling sense of admiration came to Sherwood as he watched the man opposite him. It was a good answer. Evidently the chief was no coward and was not going to flinch. He, obviously, looked down on McGrory and obeyed his commands at the moment only because he was powerless to do otherwise.

Sherwood smiled to himself. There was a rude surprise awaiting the chief in a very few minutes.

"Glad to see you know who I am," said Sherwood, viciously. "Pleases me even more that I know who you are and what you've been doing lately. Thought you weren't known to anybody, didn't you? Except the members of your lot. Well, you're wrong, see? I know who you are and others are going to know who you are, too."

"Others?" said the Chief, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes—others. Detective Inspector Lynton, for instance."

"Oh. Why Detective Inspector Lynton?"

"Why not?" said Sherwood, suavely. "You didn't hesitate to tell him about me, did you, when it suited you. Well, that's not the sort of thing you get away with. How long you've been doing it I don't know, but it's going to stop right now. The only thing is you're not going to be interested about the visit of Inspector Lynton to this place the same as I was interested,

a damn sight too interested, in Lynton's visit to me."

"What do you mean?" said the chief, slowly. Evidently he had no intention of being bullied by the blustering attitude of his unwelcome visitor.

"I'll tell you what I mean," said Sherwood, a cold note of cruelty creeping into his voice. "You're going to be dead when Lynton finds you, see? A little bullet from this little gun is going to find its way into your brain. That's what's going to happen to you, my beauty, and Lynton's going to be told your address and who you are to-morrow morning so that he can come and find you. Thought you could tell the Yard about my little plans, did you? Thought you could get me and my friends into trouble and get away with it, did you?" He laughed harshly. "Well, you're wrong. I've come to get my own back."

For the first time the chief seemed to show some fear. His face had become drawn and white and his eyes no longer held the steely look of indifference which had shone in them until that moment. One hand, his right, dropped ever so slightly from the position above his head, but even as it did so Sherwood moved his automatic so that it was pointing directly at his victim's heart.

"Keep that hand up," he growled, "and don't you move again until I tell you to. It's not healthy. Understand?"

"I understand," said the chief.

He was making a brave effort to keep his nerve, but was, evidently, much shaken. Sherwood smiled to himself.

"Two thousand of mine was what you got away with," he went on.

"Well, scarcely yours," said the chief, with a grand effort at urbanity.

"Stuff it; you know what I mean. I'd earned it. I'd done all the work. You thought you'd get away with it."

"Yes. I thought I would," said the chief, a frown coming on his face. "In point of fact, I didn't."

"You didn't?" Sherwood feigned surprise.

"No. The man who was to have got a share of it for the part which he took in our activities, absconded with the whole sum."

Sherwood threw back his head and laughed, a vicious laugh, the laugh of the brute McGrory.

"I'm glad to hear that," he cried. "That's the first thing I've heard for some time that I've been pleased about. Well, my beauty, that serves you right, but it doesn't let you out. No, not by any means. You thought it would, I suppose; that's why you told me, perhaps? It doesn't alter the fact that you told Scotland Yard about me, does it? It doesn't alter the fact that I'm going to put you where you belong just for that very thing, does it?"

He got up, scowling cruelly.

"I don't know whether you're in the habit of saying any prayers, but let me tell you this. If you are, you'd better get them over and done

with, for you haven't many more moments to live."

The chief spoke at once, and much as he strove to control it, his voice showed that his nerve was breaking.

"Look here, McGrory," he said, as evenly as he could. "If it's just a matter of two thousand that you're worrying about, well . . . I didn't get it as I've just told you, but I could arrange for you to have it in exchange for . . ."

Sherwood laughed viciously again.

"Two thousand!" he said. "Two thousand wouldn't keep you alive one minute more than the time I've decided you've got to live."

"I see," said the chief, gaining hope from the cleverly modulated tone in which Sherwood pronounced the words. "I see, but it's possible that, say, a larger sum would interest you. Er . . . I am not a poor man. I acknowledge that . . . er . . . perhaps I have acted towards you rather badly, McGrory. The very fact of my not being a poor man enables me to make . . . er . . . shall we call it reparation? If you will immediately remove yourself from this flat and promise never to annoy me again, well . . . we might say three thousand?"

Sherwood sat down again. A sigh of relief escaped the white-faced man against the wall. Involuntarily he dropped his hands. With a scowl Sherwood was leaning forward.

"Keep up those hands."

Quickly the chief obeyed.

"Er . . . am I interesting you?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sherwood, quietly. "You are interesting me, but you're talking through your hat all the same."

He was amused to see the faint dawning hope in the other's eyes immediately vanish.

"What's three thousand to me? Quite a lot, I'll agree, but you must remember you've got to make it up to me for losing the pleasure of killing you. Killing *you*, the man who told the Yard about me. What's more, it's a duty that I've got, a duty to all the others who follow the profession. You're a squealer, that's what you are, and you know what that entails. It's death you've got to get unless you're prepared to talk reasonably."

"Three thousand," said the chief quietly, "is a pretty big sum, you know. You could do quite a lot with three thousand, McGrory, and as you don't seem to attach much value to my life, anyway, I think three thousand is really . . . well, shall we say, reasonable."

Sherwood laughed cynically.

"I may not think your life's worth much. I tell you straight, I don't, but it's worth a good deal to you, isn't it? otherwise you wouldn't have started this conversation. Well, you've got to pay. My price is five thousand!"

"Five thousand?" The chief's tone of dismay was well-simulated. "Five thousand! But your demand's preposterous, McGrory! Let's say three thousand five hundred."

"Sorry you're not going to talk reasonably," said Sherwood, rising to his feet. "Five thousand

or you know what, and I haven't time to waste. Which is it going to be ? ”

For a long moment the two men stared at each other, then the chief's eyes dropped.

“ Very well,” he said, quietly. “ If you will come here to-morrow at ten o'clock I will have the money ready for you.”

Sherwood smiled.

“ Not on your life. Five thousand is the agreed price, and five thousand is going to be handed to me in cash now.”

“ But it's impossible ! I haven't got the money.”

“ Liar,” said Sherwood, quietly.

“ What ? ”

“ Liar I said and you heard me. You have got the money and a darn sight more than that too. Hurry up ; get it out.”

Sherwood was watching the chief intently and saw from the look in his eyes that the man realised he was cornered.

“ Very well,” said the chief, quietly, “ but I'm afraid I will have to move from here and to drop my hands from above my head, if I'm to get the money for you.”

“ Yes,” said Sherwood, “ that's obvious. Don't talk so much. Get on with it, and mind you, no monkey tricks. Any nonsense and I'll blow your brains out and be pleased to do it, too. I don't think I'm right to take this money instead of your life, anyway. Still five thousand is five thousand. Hurry up.”

With alacrity the chief dropped his hands

from over his head and moved to a desk. He pulled out the bottom drawer on the right hand side and removed a false bottom, revealing a small recess which held a key.

"So that's where he kept it, the old devil," said Sherwood to himself.

Taking the key the chief walked to a bookcase and inserted it in the lock, but instead of the door of the case opening, as Sherwood had surmised, the whole piece of furniture came away from the wall, disclosing a safe. Sherwood could not restrain a cry of admiration, but the chief, apparently, did not hear him. He manipulated a handle until a code word had been spelt and the door opened silently. Withdrawing a packet from the safe the man placed it on the table and counted out five thousand pounds in notes. Sherwood was surprised to see no more money in it, and only a few five-pound notes returned by the chief. But he quickly picked up the notes, and although they were for large amounts, even so they made a fairly bulky packet. These he concealed in the inside of his coat and inwardly thanked McGrory for the large pocket in the lining, which he had previously noticed, and which served the purpose admirably. Sherwood made the chief lead him to the door and there turned to him.

"You quite understand that any nonsense, like having me followed, will cause a lot of trouble. Quite a few people know that I've been here to-night; men like me who're in a position to be squealed upon. Well, if anything happens

to me, you're for it good and proper, and no money will be taken in exchange for your filthy life. That's quite clear, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the chief, slowly. "Yes, quite clear."

Sherwood turned to go, but as he did so the other's voice suddenly arrested him.

"Would it be too much," he asked, "to enquire who gave you the key which admitted you, and who told you my little arrangement about the bell? I think I can guess . . . but still, I should like to know for certain."

Sherwood looked at him and suddenly laughed.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you. Fellow by the name of Ben Sherwood. Charming lad."

With that he slipped out. He wasted no time; he was across the hall in a flash, through the outside door and lost in the shadows. Sherwood grinned happily to himself. The exploit had been even more successful than he had thought possible. He had scarcely expected to get so much out of the chief, and if he knew McGrory, the man would certainly not exist long enough to start a chase after him. The real McGrory would not be bribed out of his revenge.

Sherwood made his way as quickly as possible back to the city. There was a certain place which he wished to visit, a place which would enable him, even though his call was unauthorised, to change his personality once more. He looked about him. He was being entirely successful. There was no one about. The affair was really too easy.

“Gosh,” said Sherwood to himself. “You’ve only got to have brains to succeed in this line of business.”

Which was a very similar thought to that which passed through the mind of Detective Inspector John Lynton, following him closely, but entirely unobserved and highly delighted with his night’s work.

ESTELLE watched John Lynton as he darted round the corner after the man he thought to be McGrory ; watched, standing motionless in the shadows into which the young Inspector had drawn her. But suddenly, with his going, she realised her position, alone in London in the early hours of the morning. For a moment she felt a pang of nervousness ; the thought of the long and lonely walk home rather frightened her ; there was scant hope of securing a taxi at that time. Then Lynton's last words came to her mind and she flushed slightly as she remembered the tone in which he had called her " Estelle." His manner had not been jesting or familiar ; the name had escaped his lips spontaneously and frankly, as though it were, indeed, the natural thing for him to address her thus. A happy smile played about her lips and in her eyes there was a softer light.

Immersed in these thoughts, the girl had started to walk back home along the deserted streets, her footsteps echoing loudly in the eerie silence. She was no longer nervous ; it was as though the mere thought of John Lynton had sufficed to banish her fears. The young Inspector possessed to an extraordinary degree the power of impelling people's confidence and

trust. There was about him an entire freedom from pettiness, a simplicity and self-reliance, combined with some undefinable charm which, the girl realised, made him extremely attractive. And he had been so good to her, so kind and helpful from the first moment they had met. There had been in his manner no trace of contempt or dislike, although he knew from the start how criminally foolish she had been.

Estelle's heart was full of thanksgiving; her luck had definitely turned. She had found a friend where she had least expected to, in those same upholders of the law against whose powers she had been working of late. And she had got a job—not just a bread-and-butter one, without prospects or interest—but a chance of displaying her talent, of making good in the way she loved. God! how thankful she was.

She walked on swiftly, light of foot and heart, and suddenly turning a corner she passed a coffee stall drawn up by the kerb. There were no customers regaling themselves, for the moment, and as Estelle moved by, the cheery little owner called to her:

“What about a cup of coffee, miss?”

The girl hesitated, then stopped. The appetising smell of newly-made coffee was most inviting, as were also the fresh-looking sandwiches. The sight awakened her to the fact that she was hungry and she decided to rest a moment and partake of his wares. In truth she was really feeling rather tired. After all she had been woken from a deep sleep in order to obey

Lynton's summons ; had gone through a variety of emotions : dread, relief, joy and fear—on seeing McGrory once more—all of which had conspired to sap her energy and tire her physically, although her brain was never more fresh and alert.

Estelle smiled at the genial little man and asked for a large cup of coffee and a sandwich, then leaning up against the counter she consumed them gratefully. The man eyed her curiously. She was very different from his usual type of customer, and after a few moments he ventured :

“ Did you lose your train, miss ? ”

Estelle looked up in astonishment, but sensing the kindly concern underlying the words she smiled :

“ Er . . . no. But I thought I might get a taxi. I'm out of luck, though. Anyway, I haven't far to go and it's a lovely night.”

The man assented and for a while they chatted ; then Estelle demanded another cup. The coffee tasted extremely good and she was enjoying her adventure amazingly. When she had got into bed a few hours before, she little knew that later on that same night she would be refreshing herself at a coffee-stall in a deserted part of the city. It was great fun, much better than . . .

But in a flash her thoughts were interrupted. She had seen a figure move round the corner ; a figure she knew only too well—that of the man whom John Lynton was tracking at that very moment. The blood fled from her face and she

shrank back into the shelter of the stall as the man approached. He was on the other side of the street, walking rapidly, his head down, and Estelle realised that he was too engrossed in his own thoughts to notice her, even had she been more visible. Nevertheless she breathed a sigh of relief when he had passed, and gazing in the direction from which he had come, she waited for Lynton to appear. But there was no sign of the young Inspector.

Suddenly Estelle felt that there was something very strange about the whole thing. Why should McGrory be here, in this part of London, when only twenty minutes or so ago he had been hastening in quite an opposite direction? He couldn't be walking about all night—that was absurd. And what had happened to John Lynton? Was it possible that he had noticed the young Inspector tracking him, that he had shaken him off and doubled back in order not to be caught? Could he have . . . harmed his shadower?

At the thought a great load seemed to fall on the girl. She felt sick with apprehension and fear. Had she lost the only friend she had in the world, the only man who had ever been good to her, lost him so soon, just after they had met? That would be too cruel; fate could not be so unkind. And then another thought flashed across her brain. Lynton might well be following this man, shadowing him so unobtrusively that she had not seen him. Yes—that must be the right explanation, surely. After

all it was part of the training of police officers to be able to track people, themselves remaining completely unobserved. And yet, somehow, the girl could not believe that such was the case now—no one could succeed in being as invisible as all that. No—something had gone wrong, and Estelle realised instantly that it was up to her to do what she could to help put it right again. She had given her word to John Lynton to assist him all she could—here was her chance. She had made a promise, made it willingly and in all good faith—this promise she must not break.

It had taken less than a minute for these thoughts to flash through her mind, and now, seeing that McGrory was rapidly nearing the end of the street, Estelle hurriedly paid for the refreshment, bade the man good-night, and hastened in pursuit. She felt desperately excited and strangely happy. Perhaps it was the thought of doing something for her friend, something which would help to atone for her past misdeeds and bring her praise. To win his approval was what she most desired, and could she track this man, McGrory, track him to his lair and catch him, succeed where Lynton himself had failed, then surely he would be pleased with her, would think she had done well.

Elated by these thoughts she moved swiftly along, her eyes fixed steadfastly on her quarry. He had just reached the end of the street now, hesitated for a moment, and then turned down a

side street. Estelle redoubled her speed until she approached the corner, walked softly round it and was delighted to see that he was still in sight. On the other side of the road a policeman was strolling along; he looked at her curiously and for a moment she wondered whether she ought not to enlist his aid, to tell him the identity of that figure moving rapidly along some way ahead, and thus effect the man's instant arrest. The girl hesitated for a few seconds; that was obviously the right thing to do . . . and yet . . . she hated the idea of sharing the glory of his capture with anyone. A certain pride or obstinacy forced her decision; she would carry this thing through single-handed. This was her chance—her one big chance—of securing the respect, perhaps affection even, of the man who she now realised was uppermost in her thoughts.

Besides this, she was not absolutely certain that John Lynton himself was not somewhere around, engaged in the same wild chase. If that were so he would not welcome any interference from other members of the force; he also had his reasons for wishing to achieve an outstanding success. This decided her, and although she encountered two more policemen on the way she did not hesitate for one instant, but hurried quickly along with averted eyes.

The girl picked her way warily, making all possible use of the long shadows cast by the buildings, and of any other cover that was available. She was intensely excited, so much

so in fact that her fears as to John Lynton's safety gradually faded from her mind as she became thoroughly absorbed in the chase. She realised how fascinating it was, this hunting—more so, perhaps, when the quarry was an intelligent human being, and not some timid, inoffensive creature. Estelle had never hunted, had, indeed, always regarded the sport with great disfavour. Her sympathies had lain entirely with the fleeing fox—and yet . . . she had to admit that there was, certainly, a deep attraction in the mere act of pursuit. Perhaps in this man-hunting it was the spice of danger which appealed to her adventure-loving soul. Her quarry was no harmless animal unable to defend itself against attack—it was she, the hunter, who ran the greater hazard. Were she to be discovered, McGrory would show no mercy. To spy deliberately upon his actions he would consider to be the unforgivable sin. She knew that in this chase the peril certainly lay with the pursuer, and the thought in some extraordinary way pleased the girl—it appealed to some instinctive code of fair play.

While these thoughts had been darting through her brain, never for one instant had Estelle removed her gaze from the fleeting figure she was dogging. At this moment, arrived at a corner, McGrory moved quickly round it and was immediately lost to sight. The girl hurried forward. She had been compelled to let him get some distance ahead of her, because there was so little cover in the street, and now was

fearful lest he might have disappeared altogether by the time she reached the corner. All the same she approached this with caution ; it was possible that McGrory might have realised he was being followed, might be lying in wait, ready to pounce on whoever was shadowing him. At the thought Estelle's heart leapt to her throat in momentary panic, but she instantly controlled herself and a little smile played around her lips. There was no reason for her to suppose that the man was aware of her pursuit ; none whatsoever. He had not looked back once, but had, indeed, seemed absolutely confident that his movements were unobserved. She must not lose heart now nor let her nerves get the better of her.

Very cautiously, very carefully, she moved to the corner and looked round. She was only just in time. The figure she had been following so skilfully was standing just beyond a lamp-post, apparently deep in examination of a wall. The street she had now entered seemed to lie at the back of a row of imposing looking buildings, obviously flats ; and the wall, which appeared to afford McGrory so much interest, ran the whole length of it and was surrounding, she surmised, a communal garden. The girl watched intently to see what he was doing, and had not long to wait in order to find out. McGrory cast a quick glance round, and as he did so Estelle cowered into a doorway in sudden fright. To her great relief, however, he paid no attention to her ; obviously she had not been seen. Now,

with movements remarkably dexterous and rapid for a man of his size, he leapt to the top of the wall, taking a good hold with his hands and drawing himself up. For a few seconds she saw him outlined against the sky, an ominous looking figure, crouching on the wall on all fours—then he had dropped, out of sight, to the other side.

For a moment Estelle remained quite still, amazed at what she had seen ; but she suddenly realised that she must be nearing the end of her quest, and the thought spurred her on to further action. She ran very silently along the street until she neared that part of the wall over which McGrory had disappeared. This she examined carefully. As she had been approaching it, once more the thought of summoning the aid of a policeman had flashed through her brain, but she dismissed it immediately. She would wait a little longer, would carry her task through alone to its appointed end. To do this, however, it was necessary to scale that wall, and as Estelle looked at it, realising that it was solely McGrory's height which had enabled him to jump up and get a hold on the top, a feeling of defeat came over her. The girl stamped her small foot in anger. She was determined not to be baulked if it was humanly possible to avoid it. What would John Lynton think of her did she allow a brick wall to prevent her succeeding in her self-appointed quest ? It was merely the man's height which had given him any advantage over her ; she was as active as he was, probably more so.

Again she examined the wall carefully. At about the height of her waist a brick had been broken, and there was a small groove big enough, Estelle thought, to support her foot. She looked up at the top and measured with her eye the distance which it would still be from her were she to support herself with one toe in that groove. The girl was doubtful of success, but determined to make the attempt. She might just manage to get a good hold ; if she did, she felt perfectly certain that she would be able to pull herself up ; but that grip would have to be taken quickly, for she knew well enough that the danger of slipping from the groove was great—on account of its smallness.

But she had made up her mind and was not slow to act. She, also, looked round quickly to make quite sure that her movements were unobserved. There was no one in sight, however, and stepping back she placed the toe of her right foot firmly in the groove. Then, jumping with all her might, she threw her hands upwards. The first attempt was unsuccessful, very unsuccessful, for all she did was to graze the palm of one hand on the bricks ; but she paid no heed to the small trickle of blood from the scratch. Indeed, the fact had elated her, for she had grazed that hand on the top of the wall ; she now knew that the thing she was attempting was at least possible.

A second time she made the effort—and she succeeded. Supporting herself by her foot she gradually edged her fingers over the wall and

obtained a really good hold, then pushing with all her strength on her toe she pulled herself up. It was a hard struggle, but, gasping for breath, Estelle suddenly found herself on the top. In a moment all her feelings of panic returned. She felt, as she crouched there on all fours—just as McGrory had done such a short time before—that she was in full view of all the world ; as indeed, she was, had anyone been looking in her direction. Estelle quickly glanced round and was immediately reassured ; there was still not a soul in sight. She looked down in the direction in which McGrory had disappeared and saw, as she expected, a fairly large garden running the length of the block of flats. There was no sign of McGrory, of the man she had been hunting, but even as she realised this it dawned on Estelle that it was one thing to clamber up the wall and quite another to get down on the opposite side. There she was, perched precariously on the top, from which conspicuous position she must instantly remove herself, and yet the drop to the bottom looked enormous. True, there was a grass lawn on which to fall, but this was only a very small comfort ; a grass lawn is as hard as a brick wall if fallen on from a sufficient height. There was no other alternative, however. Estelle braced herself with the thought that the wall was only a few feet taller than she was ; with any luck she would escape injury. Shutting her eyes, she jumped towards the lawn.

For a moment the girl lay quite still, all the

breath knocked out of her small body and frightened more than she would have cared to admit. Then, as noiselessly as she could, she picked herself up and was relieved to find that she still had the use of all her limbs. She had succeeded in the attempt, and, apparently without harm. The instant she realised this fact Estelle remembered her reason for doing it, and looked round quickly in order to decide in which direction it was most likely her quarry had gone. As she glanced at the great building, apparently comprising a block of flats, she saw a sight which made her cower to the ground for fear that she might be observed. From the windows of a ground floor room light was shining into the darkness, and as she watched, a black shape suddenly arose in front of one of them ; a shape which she instantly recognised as that of McGrory. His actions were obvious to anyone who, like herself, might have been regarding him. She saw him place one leg over the sill and very carefully, very slowly, pull himself through the window and stand up within the room. There was something so cat-like in his movements that Estelle shuddered. She wondered just how much noise he had made and realised that the answer must be—none. The man had moved with such incredible silence and purpose that she felt she had witnessed something almost uncanny, something horrible in its menace.

The girl never hesitated. Straightening herself from her crouching attitude she ran, very quietly, to the shadows of the house ; then, working

her way quickly but still without the slightest noise, she moved to a position just below the sill of the lighted window. Very cautiously, very silently, Estelle drew herself up until her eyes could see into the room.

A man was seated writing at a desk placed sideways to the window, and standing between him and the watching girl was McGrory, a vicious gleam of cruel hatred in his eyes, a pistol in his hand pointed unswervingly at the man's back.

Estelle longed to cry out ; McGrory's intention was obvious—but she found herself completely unable to utter one word of warning ; her throat had gone dry with fear. She could do nothing but stare, stare at that man writing so calmly, so peacefully, entirely unaware of the sinister and terrible figure lurking behind him, one finger on the trigger of his death-dealing weapon.

I AM continuing this record to-night in spite of the fact that I had no intention when I laid down my pen an hour or so ago of writing any more for the moment. But events are happening so rapidly that I feel that unless I set them down as they occur the details may escape from my mind. I shall be very busy in the near future, so busy that I certainly will have no time for writing. I have said that events are happening so rapidly that I can scarcely keep pace with them: let me give an example.

Only an hour ago I pushed aside this record, having completed all that I proposed to set down this evening. Almost simultaneously my bell rang, and in such a manner that I understood my signal had been given and assumed one of my band was seeking admittance. For a moment I wondered who it could be, then realised it could only be Five and thought that perhaps he had come to give me information about the evening's efforts and why they had so entirely failed. I hastened immediately to the door, opened it and received one of the rudest shocks of my life. That man, McGrory, whom I thought safe in prison and out of the way, was standing before me, an automatic in his hand and a vicious gleam in his eye. He was out for mischief—that was obvious. On the whole, I cannot

blame him. At first I did not know who had told him that I was responsible for the regrettable—to him—failure of his plans, but in my own mind I had a pretty good idea. It could be none other than that scoundrel Sherwood, for McGrory knew things about me which I thought were known only to very few, certainly not to him. He knew, for instance, the correct manner in which to manipulate the bell in order to give the signal, so that I should immediately open the door, unsuspecting an outsider. He also knew how I had achieved his discomfiture when he had made that effort in the Victoria-Brighton train. Far worse, from my point of view, he knew that I was what is so unpleasantly called in this profession of ours—a squealer. In other words, a man who gives away information to the police. What he failed to realise was that I am not a squealer by instinct. This I would very much like to make quite clear in this, my record, because the stigma is most unpleasant.

I do not, as others of the type are apt to do, give away the plans of other gang leaders merely for the sake of ingratiating myself with the police or to be paid money for the information. All that I do, and it is done reluctantly and only when absolutely essential, is occasionally to give the police such information which may further my own plans. I could never deny the charge of preying on my own profession, but I can and do most emphatically deny any connection with the ordinary run of men who are designated squealers. True, there is no gainsaying that I have given information

to the police, but if each single instance on which I have done so is looked into, it will be seen that I only did so when it was necessary for the success of my own plans.

I had no time, however, in which to explain all this to the man McGrory. In any case, I doubt whether he would have appreciated the subtle difference. He would have told me probably, in his rude manner, that there was no difference at all: I should have denied it and tempers would have become frayed, which, from my point of view, would have been a great pity, for I did not trust the finger which lingered so lovingly over the trigger of his automatic.

He made it quite clear from the outset, that he had come to my flat to kill me, and since I pride myself on being a fair man I must confess that from his point of view I really could not find it in my heart to blame him. What I did object to, however, was the fact that he seemed so set on it. Usually the mere mention of money will take a man's mind off any purpose, no matter how long he has been brooding over it, and with a man of McGrory's mentality, greedy for wealth and entirely devoid of any honourable desire to dispose of me because I had let him down, I should have thought he would have reacted to my offer far quicker than he did. As a matter of fact the moment I realised that I was in a very tight corner I mentioned that I would let him have the two thousand which I had been the means of his losing. He laughed at me. I then mentioned three thousand, which I thought would satisfy his lust for wealth. I

didn't make the mistake of offering a small, paltry sum to begin with. Had I done so he would have grown angry and probably pulled that abominable trigger, and such an action would have been, to say the least of it, highly dangerous, because the man had kept the muzzle of his automatic pointed remarkably steadily towards my heart.

But although McGrory instantly reacted to the suggestion he laughed at the large sum which I offered him, and when I asked for information as to the sort of amount he was expecting, he said five thousand. Frankly, I would have given double that sum in order to get out of the fix in which I was. I could well afford to. I can claim, I think, that I have been probably the most successful of all men in my profession in the last two or three years. But still his audacity amazed me, his greed repelled me. I offered him five hundred more than my last bid, and as I did so I could not refrain from smiling to myself at the humour of the situation: here was I wrangling with a man as to the price of my life! He stuck to his original amount, however. He made it very clear in that unpleasant, bullying manner which is the only form of diplomacy, I suppose, that his infantile brain can assimilate, that he would accept not one penny less than five thousand, and realising that it was quite hopeless to argue with the man any further—I agreed.

It surprised me, however, to see that he stood by his demand in a very honorable manner. There was only one way of getting the money, and that was by going to my safe. To get to my safe meant

to expose the fact that I had a great deal more than five thousand in it, and therefore that I could afford to pay him more, and although I did my best—I believe successfully—to conceal from him a very large amount of money in cash which was in the safe, it was not an easy matter. I was lucky actually in picking up a bundle which amounted to only a few pounds over the five thousand, and in passing I must say that I hope the notes bring the man luck. One thousand nine hundred and eighty of the sum which I paid him was in useless bank notes, the very notes, indeed, which Sherwood passed on me not so very long ago. The other notes are ones which came from what I call my “Dangerous” pile, which means that I am uncertain as to whether the numbers have been taken and the money can be traced should they be put into circulation. I never touch that money until I am quite sure that it cannot be traced back. I have been in the habit, also, of getting rid of it at less than its face value to Vickers, who sends it out to agents in various parts of the world who can pass the money in very small quantities, and get away with it. There is a great possibility, therefore—in fact I should say that the odds are definitely against McGrory’s having much pleasure out of the money which he extorted from me as the price of my life. As I understand that some of those notes were actually tainted with blood, owing to some mistake when they were secured, it may well be that the price of my freedom from McGrory will eventually fetch him to the gallows. So much for diplomacy !

I really feel that I have gone through a good night's work, for not only have I extricated myself from a most difficult position, but I have also succeeded in being revenged on the man who caused all the trouble. I can put McGrory's visit to another use, a more psychological one. Had there been any doubt in my mind before his arrival as to whether I should continue my activities or suspend them for a longish period there is now none whatsoever. Things are becoming unpleasant : not only has my luck turned dead against me but also it is obvious that a sinister influence is at work to upset all my plans. I would lay a large sum of money to a farthing that this sinister influence would answer to the name of Ben Sherwood. It is, therefore, more important than ever that I should get this man before he can do any more damage—and get him I will.

I shall now go to bed and snatch two or three hours rest. I shall then visit Vickers as early as

ESTELLE screamed. The cry came almost simultaneously with the dull, metallic click of the silenced automatic which McGrory had used on the unsuspecting figure at the desk. Estelle had seen the man collapse over his writing, had seen him slide with a sickening thud from his chair to the floor.

The moment the girl screamed she realised that she had given herself away, that she had done the very last thing she should have done. Even as she turned to fly panic-stricken, she saw out of the corner of her eye the figure of the monster McGrory whip round and leap for the window. As she started to move Estelle felt a heavy hand clutch her shoulder in a vice-like grip and jerk her roughly. Before she could utter another sound McGrory's left hand was crushed against her mouth. For a moment he did not move but held her fast, and in that moment thoughts flashed through the girl's brain, tumbled over each other in an amazingly rapid sequence. She cursed herself bitterly for a fool; she cursed her self-satisfaction, her stupid ambition to run this man to earth and find out what he was about without calling in the aid of the police. She knew that had she attracted the attention of one or other of the policemen

whom she had passed when trailing McGrory, then, at least, there would have been a reasonable chance that murder would not have been committed before her eyes, that the huddled figure lying within the room would still have been alive. For that the man was dead Estelle never doubted for a moment: he had crumpled up so completely, so utterly. Before her eyes McGrory had settled an account with him; he would now settle one with her. Was she to be treated in a similar fashion? Would there come that dull, metallic click—and then . . .

Sick with fear and misery the girl longed intensely for John Lynton. If only he were there to protect her from this brute, this murderer from whom she could expect no mercy. But . . . he was not here, and should she die there was little chance of his ever knowing how desperately she had striven to win his approval; it had all been useless, everything lost through her crass stupidity. Just when life had begun to hold things worth living for, just when love and fortune had dawned upon the horizon! Oh, what a fool she had been, what a fool! Should she shriek for help immediately it was possible, immediately that the great hand had ceased to crush her mouth? And if she did, was there much chance of being heard? Suddenly, with a flash of hope, Estelle remembered that the building had appeared to be a block of flats. Surely someone would hear her were she to cry out for aid? Perhaps some passer-by might be attracted and come to her rescue.

A sudden movement on the part of her captor drove all these thoughts instantly from her head. McGrory leant over the window sill and whispered in her ear.

"One sound and you'll go the way *he's* gone, see?"

He jerked his head backwards. Estelle could do nothing. She nodded. McGrory removed his hand from her mouth and seizing her by the other shoulder, helped her roughly through the window into the room. Although she was frightened, desperately frightened, Estelle found a moment in which to marvel at the man's extraordinary strength. She weighed little, but still McGrory made nothing of the effort and the moment he had placed her upright on the floor, he pointed to a chair out of sight from the windows. Averting her gaze from the sprawling figure by the desk—whose clothes were already becoming darkened by an ever-growing scarlet stain—she did as she was told. McGrory moved over to the switch by the door, and turned out the electric light.

"Should have done that before," he growled, Estelle realised, more to himself than to her, "but how could I tell the baggage had followed me? Who the hell is she, anyway? Better have a look."

A beam of light suddenly shone out of the dark room, its rays falling directly upon Estelle's face. The girl heard McGrory withdraw his breath sharply.

"My God," he cried, "Estelle Desmond!"

There was a long pause, a pause pregnant with despair for Estelle. What would this recognition mean? Would McGrory connect her with this man whom he had slain? Would he take her life also? And then out of the darkness there came a sound, a sound which for sheer brutality the girl had never heard the equal: it was a laugh, a bestial laugh, mirthless and merciless, cruel in its intensity and volume, which stopped as suddenly as it had rung out. Estelle guessed the reason. McGrory had momentarily forgotten to curb his fiendish glee at regaining control over this girl who had left him; forgotten that he might be overheard. Sitting there in the darkness, the rays of the powerful torch still concentrated on her face, Estelle saw the light suddenly approach her and shrank back in her chair as she realised that McGrory was now very near. She shut her eyes involuntarily, bracing herself to meet the blow which she felt must come. Another laugh, more subdued this time, although no less brutal, greeted her action. Estelle opened her eyes.

"Yes, you're right to cringe, my beauty. You know what you're going to get from me, don't you? You know what you deserve? Well, you can't escape it, see? But I'm going to make you suffer! God . . . I'm not going to let you off so easily as I did that fellow! You're coming back with me! I'm going to take time over you and enjoy myself."

The ominous words filled the girl with terror.

She was blinded by the brilliant ray of light which played unceasingly on her face. She could see no one. She only knew that from behind that light a voice full of fiendish cruelty, the voice of the man into whose power she had fallen, was goading her in full enjoyment of her despair. All other thoughts fled from her brain : she was filled with an anguish of suspense, almost longing for the man to stop talking, to cease frightening her and to carry out his infamous intention of taking her life. But it was not to be : McGrory spoke again, very evenly this time.

"Now listen, Estelle. You're coming away from here with me. I can't stop to deal with you now as you deserve : somebody might come in. You've got to sit there quietly and not move while I get to work. There's just one little thing I've got to do before I go. Got that quite clear ? "

"Yes," whispered Estelle, hopelessly.

"Right, and just in case you haven't, have a look at this."

Suddenly into the rays of the torch McGrory thrust the pistol which so recently he had used with such deadly effect. Estelle recoiled sharply and the man laughed again. As suddenly as it had appeared the automatic vanished from sight and the light was extinguished. But if any hope had come to Estelle that she might now escape, it was immediately banished, for she felt McGrory seize her wrists and tie a piece of cord so tightly round them that it almost

cut into her flesh. What he did with the other end she did not know, but assumed that it had been tied loosely around his arm so that if she moved he would be instantly warned of the fact. Estelle shut her eyes, but it was useless. The glare of the torch, even though it had been removed, seemed to have affected her sight; she felt, indeed, as though it were still beating down upon her. There was darkness all around, she knew, but it was a hopeless darkness. The girl felt sick within herself at the horror of the situation. She opened her eyes again and now saw that McGrory had directed the rays of the torch on himself. He had taken a safety razor, presumably from his pocket, and was in the process of shaving off what remained of the flowing moustache which he normally wore; obviously having been at work already with a pair of scissors. Even as she watched, Estelle realised the enormous difference that this was going to make to his appearance. She stared at him intently, unable to take her eyes from his face, fascinated by his quick movements. In a few seconds he was done. He turned and smiled in the darkness into the direction in which she was sitting. The effect was eerie. Estelle would scarcely have believed it possible for the man to be so changed.

“Not bad, eh?” said McGrory, gruffly. “Now, my beauty, I want you to listen to this. There’s an argument I’ve got, an argument which will be in my pocket but held in my right hand, which I think is a very good argument,

why you shouldn't try to get away from me. Have you got that quite clear ? ”

Suddenly, into the beam of light once more directed at the girl, McGrory thrust the automatic, a menacing weapon with its silencer fixed to the barrel.

“ And I shan't hesitate to shoot, either. I'm not going to let you out of my clutches, you may be quite sure of that. That man let me down and he's paid for it. You let me down and you're going to pay for it—but in my own way. I'm not going to shoot you. I don't like shooting girls, and anyway that death's much too quick for you. I don't forgive people who leave me in the lurch like you did. You're going to come quietly, aren't you ? ”

She nodded hopelessly. There was nothing that she could do.

“ Come on then.”

Estelle rose to her feet. The man quickly removed the string from her wrists and the girl felt great relief as the blood once more surged easily through them. To her surprise McGrory did not lead her to the window by which they had entered ; instead he opened the door of the room and pulled her roughly through, making for the front door of the flat. He moved towards it unerringly and Estelle realised that either the man had been in the place before, or that its topography had been carefully explained to him. Very cautiously he opened the front door and looked out. There was no one in the lift hall. Quickly pulling her to the outer door he opened

this and pushed her through, and as she passed him she heard his voice, full of venom, whisper in her ear.

"One sound, one attempt to get away and you're a goner."

But there was no need to remind her of the position in which she stood. Part of Estelle's spirit was gone. She had seen a frightful sight within that hour. She had been threatened and ill-treated by this man into whose power she had fallen, and knew just what to expect. Almost placidly, with the calm of despair, Estelle walked into the street. McGrory moved quickly, but not so quickly that she could not keep up with him easily, or that his speed drew any suspicious attention to himself. They walked to the end of the street and turned down a main thoroughfare. It was not long before they reached a taxi rank. The dawn was just beginning to break and only two taxis were drawn up waiting to be hired. Into the first of these McGrory pushed the girl, then giving the driver an address, he jumped in beside her. She felt his rough fingers seize her arm and pull her towards him. Once more she heard his voice so near to her ear that she could feel his breath.

"No monkey tricks, young woman. Don't you forget what's going to happen to you if you try to get away from me."

She felt him tighten his fingers on her arm, tighten them viciously, and knew that there was no need for him to hold her in such a way, that he was doing it out of sheer wanton cruelty.

Estelle bit her lips, determined not to cry out, not to make a sound over which he could gloat in malicious enjoyment of her agony. He said no word, yet every moment she felt his clutching fingers gripping her arm ever more tightly. The pain was intense; her arm felt on fire.

McGrory seemed to sense that the girl was striving her utmost to bear the torture unflinchingly; he was amused by this rather unexpected resistance, and continued his efforts to break her will. The unequal battle went on for a few minutes, and then, unable any longer to endure the torment, Estelle gave a gasp which was half a moan. McGrory laughed harshly and released her.

"Just a little taster of what's to come, my beauty."

The man leant back in his seat, took out a cigarette from a packet which was in his pocket, and lit it. Almost fainting, her arm still aching violently from the brutal treatment she had received, Estelle also leant back. Tears came unbidden to her eyes, she forced them back; that, at least, the pleasure of seeing her cry, he should not have. Although the physical suffering had been great it was not that which had drawn her tears. She felt sick with shame and humiliation at the thought of her failure to hide her pain. Couldn't she succeed in anything? Was she so great a coward that she was unable to bear a little torture without crying out and making her captor rejoice? Her heart full of

misery and self-contempt the girl stared listlessly before her.

The drive lasted some little time and it was much more light when the taxi at last drew up, outside a dingy house. McGrory bundled the girl out, paid off the taxi man quickly, and pushed her in through the door, which he opened with a key. Shutting this behind him he led her to a small room on the first floor. He pushed her roughly in, and throwing her to a chair so that she fell into it, McGrory stood by the door, legs apart, hands on his hips; he laughed mirthlessly.

"So not content with leaving me you thought you'd trail me up and act as a squealer, eh? That's what you were after, was it, my beauty? Well, let me tell you something. You saw what happened to a squealer to-night. That man squealed on me to the police. He got what was coming to him for it. But you—you're worse if anything. I suppose you were mixed up with the fellow who got my two thousand from me, eh? That's why you left me, was it? Thought you'd clear out before, and foil all suspicion, eh? Aha, a clever idea for your pretty head." Suddenly a new gleam came into his eyes. "Pretty head, did I say? by God, that's it. Yes, you've got a pretty face, young woman, and that's going to be your punishment. I'm not going to kill you. I don't hold with killing girls if it can be avoided, although God knows, a squealer, man or woman, deserves to be killed. But you . . . you've got a pretty

face and that's given me my idea." He laughed again, viciously, mirthlessly. "You're not going to have a pretty face when I've done with you."

Very little light had yet filtered into the room through the small window, and Estelle, watching the form of the man who was tormenting her, could barely see its dim outline; but now as he leapt towards her she realised, too late, the speed of the assault. Before she could make the slightest resistance the man had seized her roughly, pulled her to her feet and she felt his eyes glaring into her own.

"You've only got about a quarter of an hour," she suddenly heard him say, "in which still to look pretty, my beauty! I'll just take advantage of it now."

She felt him crush her to him, felt his lips burning on her own. Mad with loathing and anger Estelle exerted all her strength to free herself, fighting violently to be released from that hateful embrace. It was useless; her efforts were pitiful; the man was enormously strong. With despair in her heart the girl continued to struggle wildly, tried to draw her face away from the sickening contact. Tears of anger and misery rolled down her cheeks; she became breathless, almost choking with wrath. McGrory seemed to be enjoying her struggles, to be amused by their utter futility, and suddenly realising this the girl became quiet, her face livid, her eyes closed. In a few minutes he threw her from him, panting and heart-sick, into a chair. Seizing some rope from beneath it he quickly bound her

firmly so that she was unable to move hand or foot. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket he pushed it into her mouth and tied a string round her head to keep it in position; he then drew back to survey his handiwork. With a look of evil satisfaction on his face McGrory moved over to the grate and collecting a few sticks which lay near it, he quickly kindled a fire. For a few minutes he watched until the coals were glowing red, then taking a poker he thrust it into the fire and left it there.

Standing up he turned, with a malicious grin, to the girl, and in that instant Estelle realised what was in his mind. He was going to brand her, burn the flesh of her face and destroy all traces of her beauty, make her a thing to be shunned, a horror to herself and everyone else. As the truth dawned on her the girl nearly fainted with despair and terror. It was not the physical pain she dreaded so much, although she knew that would be ghastly enough; it was the thought of the ruin which such a disfigurement would inevitably bring, the utter impossibility of her ever appearing on the stage again—and most of all, John Lynton's face when next he saw her. Far better, thought Estelle, to kill her outright at once as he had done that other man, than to leave her life and take away all that made living at all worth while. Suddenly a numbness came over her, everything seemed to be happening in a nightmare, as though she were, indeed, detached from the scene, watching all this happen to some other girl in whom she was not vitally

interested ; as though it was some thrilling episode depicted on the stage, which, though exciting, caused her no personal anxiety. She stared at the man before her, stared vacantly, perhaps wondering who he was and why he was there. This state of semi-consciousness lasted for a few minutes longer, during which McGrory neither spoke nor moved, but stood with that grim smile on his face staring at the girl, revelling in the thought of his coming revenge.

Suddenly he turned again to the fire, withdrew the poker and looked at it. It was glowing red, but apparently not red enough for him ; he was not satisfied. He returned it once more to the fire and waited, rather like a man who grudges every instant before his task may be accomplished. He was gloating, positively gloating over the devilish deed which he was about to do. At his first movement the merciful mists of unreality had flown from the girl's mind ; she knew now exactly what was happening and that it was she, Estelle Desmond, who was the principal figure in this incredible scene of unbridled cruelty. Feeling sick and faint she braced herself to face the terrible ordeal that was coming, and wondered whether the pain would cause her to lose consciousness immediately, hoping, even longing that it should, for she doubted her ability to bear it otherwise. The thought that she might not be able to conceal her anguish, that she would add to her torturer's vicious joy, filled her with despair, yet she knew

that it would be quite impossible for her to hide her suffering.

A sudden movement on the part of the man attracted her attention once more. She saw him withdraw the poker again from the fire. Her eyes were riveted on that red-hot end; fascinated by it she was utterly unable to turn away, to look in any other direction although she passionately longed to. McGrory was evidently satisfied. He turned and advanced to her quickly, then placed the poker close to her face so that she could already feel the terrible heat. She closed her eyes but even as she did so panic seized her. She struggled desperately with her bonds, tried to cry out to summon aid. The thought of John Lynton filled her with an almost insane yearning for his help. If only he were there, oh God, if only he were there! She must protect herself; this infamous disfigurement must not happen. How could she bear to read in *his* eyes pity and unwilling aversion instead of admiration? How could she ever bear to meet *him* again? No, she would rather die; she would kill herself, finish off the work McGrory had begun. Distracted and almost swooning the girl continued to pull at the ropes which bound her so securely, trying to yell through the gag which smothered her every cry. It was all hopeless; she was absolutely impotent, impotent to save herself or attract help. The bitter truth was almost too much to bear and she sank back exhausted at last and praying for death.

McGrory stood watching her for a few moments, evidently revelling in her anguish. The man's back was turned towards the door. There was only a very dim light in the room, but even as he stood there about to start on his fiendish deed of cruelty, the door opened gradually, very slowly, very silently. As McGrory leant forward, about to place the red-hot iron against the frail cheek of the almost insensible girl, a voice suddenly spoke harshly from the door.

"Stop that, McGrory! Drop that poker and up with your hands! Just in time, I think."

It was the voice of Detective Inspector John Lynton.

THE poker fell from McGrory's nerveless fingers. He stood motionless, not daring to look round, but his jaw had dropped and the gleam had left his eye. More by good luck than intention the poker fell to the floor clear of the chair and the girl, and the red-hot end slowly began to burn yet another hole in the threadbare carpet. Estelle, who had almost fainted and had given up all hope of rescue, opened her eyes and looked in the direction whence the voice had come; but McGrory was directly in between her and the man standing in the doorway, and because of her bonds she could not move her body far enough to see round him. But the voice—that voice which she had longed to hear, but in her wildest dreams had not dared to hope for—the voice of John Lynton spoke sharply again.

“Pick up that poker, McGrory. I'm surprised at you! Want to set the house on fire? Wouldn't be a bad idea, I admit: this place wants rebuilding. All the same I'd rather it happened when I wasn't here. Put it back in the fender: that's right. Not in the fire this time; you won't require it again quite so hot as you've made it.” There came a gay laugh. “You're a clown, McGrory, that's what you are. You—with your red-hot pokers: thank

God I arrived in time. I'd rather my little Estelle retained her pretty features. Turn round, McGrory, turn round and let's have a look at you."

McGrory turned slowly. He dreaded looking into the piercing blue eyes of Detective Inspector John Lynton, who had caught him red-handed in this vile act of cruelty. All the spirit had left the bullying creature now that he had been found out. He was beaten, defeated; and he knew it. A vision rose before him of a prison cell, a short walk one morning about dawn and a sudden drop . . . out of life. At last, however, he raised his eyes from the floor and looked at the man whose unexpected interference had—from his point of view—been so untimely.

An almost comical look of blank astonishment came into his eyes; he stared at the man by the door, stared just as hard as the girl who was sitting helplessly in the chair; for the man at the door was not John Lynton, the man at the door resembled no one that McGrory had ever known. He was a dark young man, spruce in appearance, dressed in a neat brown suit and wearing a small, black moustache.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the astounded McGrory.

The young man laughed. This time it was not the laugh of Inspector John Lynton . . . but that of Ben Sherwood. All Estelle's high hopes of instant release were banished and shattered irretrievably. She knew that laugh; it could belong to no one other than the man

whom she dreaded just as much as McGrory. Had she, then, fallen from the frying-pan into the fire? Was this only a travesty of rescue, a cruel trick of Providence to make her think safety was nigh, when, indeed, her danger was even greater; for she knew that Sherwood would not stop at branding her . . . he would not deem that a sufficient revenge. To him her life was forfeit, and although a moment before she had craved for death, the sudden interruption with its promise of rescue had banished her resignation, filling her with hopes of deliverance. She stared at the man before her and for a moment wondered whether she were really mistaken, whether this man was not, after all, the murderer from whom she had fled in terror not so long before. His make-up was marvellous; there was no trace of the Ben Sherwood she knew. His very features seemed entirely different and yet—that laugh; she could not have been mistaken. There is something intensely individual in a person's laugh, and this time Sherwood had not disguised it. Also—and with this realisation all her doubts vanished—he had given a perfect imitation of John Lynton's voice; no one but Sherwood could have deceived her so utterly, and yet in spite of all this Estelle waited in an agony of suspense for the man to speak, waited for some confirmation of her fears. In a moment she knew—the man spoke, and the voice was the voice of Ben Sherwood.

“I am surprised at you, McGrory! I, am surprised at you for your very ungallant behaviour

towards this charming young lady. What on earth has she done to you that you should take such a cruel revenge? After all, McGrory, don't forget that pretty young women aren't so very plentiful in this world, and the rare ones that we have we ought to do all that we can to preserve; don't you think so?"

McGrory scowled ferociously; but he ~~could~~ do nothing in the face of the automatic which Sherwood held in his hand and which was pointed unerringly at his chest.

"I see that you do," continued Sherwood, banteringly. "Well, if that's the case and it really is your opinion, it seems to me that you're acting in a most inconsistent manner. Why deprive one of these rare ones of her beauty? I think it's most ungentlemanly, McGrory. I'm surprised at you more than I can say."

"Stow it," said McGrory suddenly. He almost shouted the words. Evidently he had been goaded to a sudden fury. A steely glint came into Sherwood's eyes.

"And don't talk to me like that, McGrory. When you address me, remember to address me as 'sir'; that's about the difference between our respective spheres in our profession. You've been fooled all round, I'm afraid. Fooled by this girl, first, when she left you. Yes, I know all about that." He laughed. "Just sit down in that chair, McGrory. No, not on the girl's lap; in the other chair. I don't think, in view of what you were about to do to her, she would want you to sit in her lap. Thank you. Now

remain quiet, and no nonsense, please, and remember, the slightest sign of resistance and out you go from this world—which you're leaving anyway, of course, as soon as the police get hold of you. It wouldn't be indiscreet to ask, would it, if you succeeded in doing in the man whose address I gave to you?"

Suddenly McGrory seemed to be galvanised into understanding.

"Whose address *you* gave me," he almost shouted.

"Not so loud, please." Sherwood laughed gaily. "I don't know how many people there are in this house. I rather gather that you're alone in it, from my previous visit when I was taking the part of old man Vickers."

"What?" gasped McGrory.

"Suggestion is a great deal, you know, in the art of impersonation," said Sherwood. "It never occurred to you that I wasn't Vickers; partly because you met me where you might have expected to meet Vickers. I was very grateful to you, McGrory, at the time, very grateful to you indeed, because I would certainly have walked into that trap set for me by Inspector Lynton if it hadn't been for your timely warning. In exchange, and out of that feeling of gratitude I gave you the address of the man you wanted. I hope that you have succeeded in dealing with him as you desired."

"I have," said McGrory viciously.

"That's all to the good, and I'll tell you why. I wanted that man out of the way too.

He was the head of the gang, McGrory, who squealed on you, the gang for whom I worked for some little time. But you've still got to get your revenge on the man who actually impersonated that poor boob Thompson and took the money from Inspector Lynton."

"Wasn't it the same man?" asked McGrory, a sudden scowl on his features.

"Oh dear, no. The chief doesn't mix up in these things if he can help it. Anyway, not to a large extent. He pretends that he's the brain, or rather he used to, McGrory, if I understand your last words aright. You've dealt with him, you say. He's no doubt out of action?"

"Yes," said McGrory. "I shot him."

"With a true aim?"

"With a true aim," said McGrory, sullenly.

"Splendid; that's just what I wanted to know. He was one of the men I wanted out of the way. There's another, McGrory. Do you know who it is?"

McGrory looked up, a flicker of interest in his eyes.

"Inspector Lynton?" he hazarded.

"Oh, well. I don't know; perhaps yes," said Sherwood, quietly. "I've not got much use for Lynton, because he's a police officer, rather an intelligent one at that; but I don't wish him any particular harm. No other than I do any constable whom I might meet in the street. Now, McGrory, think again."

"Old man Vickers," said the other.

Sherwood laughed harshly.

"He's dead," he said, quietly.

"Dead?"

"Yes," said Sherwood. "He was in the way so I removed him. In exactly the same manner, McGrory, as this other person is also in the way and as this other person is also going to be removed."

A dawning fear seemed to come into McGrory's eyes as Estelle watched him. She had turned her gaze from Sherwood and had glanced at the other for a moment. All this while the girl had been listening intently to this duel of words, fascinated beyond measure at the extraordinary scene being enacted before her eyes. She had forgotten entirely her own part in the drama; all her thoughts were concentrated on the two men. She was striving to understand what lay behind Sherwood's grim pleasantries, to unravel the whole mystery of the man's connection with McGrory. That one glance at the latter had enabled her to solve one part of the matter; McGrory was desperately frightened, the tables had been turned on him indeed, it was he whose life was now in danger. She watched the two in tense excitement, and then heard McGrory say, haltingly:

"Not . . . not me?"

Once again Sherwood laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"Yes, my friend, as you so succinctly put it—you. When you met me this evening and told me how you longed to get your own back

on the man who had squealed on you I gave you the chance ; not because it's my habit to give away people, but for the very good reason that I wanted that man out of the way. I wanted one or two others out of the way too. Vickers, for instance. Well, he's gone. You. You're an important addition to the mortuary, from my point of view. You know too much about me. That's your trouble, McGrory, and also I rather feel that if at liberty you might take advantage of me and try to . . . well, get me out of the way, for instance. That would be inadvisable. I'd rather it were the other way about, as it's going to be the other way about very soon. But when you came to me to-night and told me that you wanted to get hold of this other fellow, this man whom I had known for so long as my chief, I was, as you can imagine, nothing loth to give you the address and directions you required—because, you know, one might make a mistake, one never knows. They say that murder will out. I don't know who 'they' are who say it and I think they must be rather stupid, considering the number of undiscovered crimes that occur throughout the year. But still, murder might out, you know. On the other hand when the police discover the chief's body they will find no trace of me ; if any trace is to be found at all it will be of you, McGrory. You will agree that it was rather a nice idea ; but now I have come to finish you. I had no thought that I was to have the pleasure of seeing Estelle Desmond here, or of

being able to save her beauty. That was very wrong of you, very wrong, indeed," he was talking now as he might to a small child. "I've told you that beauty is very, very rare. Do let's keep what we have."

As he was speaking he walked to the chair in which McGrory sat and suddenly galvanised himself into activity. He moved with amazing speed, and from his coat pocket took several lengths of thick cord. This he wound round the unsuspecting McGrory and fastened securely so that the man was in a very short time as powerless to move as he had made Estelle herself a little while before. He then moved round so that he was standing directly between the two chairs and surveyed his handiwork with pride.

"Very neat job, I think, McGrory. Almost as neat as you've made of that poor girl. I came ready for it, you may notice; I had everything in my pocket that I might require. That's easily understood, McGrory. I came with everything that I wanted because I knew exactly what I was going to do. Finish you off, old man. You've ceased to be useful to me, you see; you've done in the only other fellow I wanted to get rid of. Well—now you must go yourself."

During all this McGrory had sat, almost spellbound, watching his tormentor talking. He had not said a word. He had, apparently, been unable to speak, so astonished was he at the sudden amazing reversal of fortune which had

occurred ; so staggered at the perilous situation in which he found himself. For in spite of all the banter and the goading tone of voice which had been used by Ben Sherwood, there could be no doubt at all that the young man meant precisely what he said. He threatened lightly perhaps, but his threats were no idle ones, and McGrory knew as well as he knew anything that unless some utterly unexpected interruption should come, just such an interruption as Ben Sherwood himself had provided in the case of Estelle, he was a doomed man. But when a bully finds himself bullied in his turn he usually crumples up like a pricked balloon and ceases to count one way or the other in this world of ours. McGrory was no exception to the rule. He had bullied all his life ; bullied the men who had worked for him, bullied everyone around him, and now that Ben Sherwood was obviously the master and was giving him a taste of his own medicine McGrory not only did not like it, but was utterly unable to face it. He began to whimper ; a noise which disgusted both his hearers. He implored for mercy, he offered to become Sherwood's slave, to do anything that the man would require of him if only his life were spared. For some time Sherwood stood with folded arms listening to the man's torrents of entreaties, then he turned and spat into the fire. Estelle, under her gag, almost laughed ; it was so perfect and so convincing a demonstration of the disgust which she felt at the moment.

Sherwood turned suddenly to the girl, without interrupting the unceasing words which flowed from the almost frantic McGrory. Quite gently he removed the gag from her mouth, and turning sharply, walked over to McGrory and thrust it into place, fastening it securely. The words ceased abruptly ; noises came from the man, but very low. Evidently he was doing his utmost still to plead his cause, but from that moment onwards Sherwood paid him no more attention. Instead he walked over to the girl and looked at her with a cynical smile playing about his lips.

“So we meet again, Estelle.”

Estelle did not reply ; instead she leant her head back against the chair and regarded him coldly. She was on firmer ground here ; she knew how to deal with this man better than she had been able to deal with the bully, McGrory. She was grateful to him in a way, for undoubtedly by his timely appearance he had saved her from being mutilated, probably from losing her life. But she was in no mood to remember this too much in his favour. She could not forget his savage appearance as he had knifed the man who had been his companion, the last time she had seen him. She could not forget the fierce glint which had shone in his eyes in that act, a glint which had almost betokened devilish delight, and she could not forget one thing that he had said to McGrory while he had been taunting him. He had confessed to having killed Vickers ; he had confessed, in a sense,

to having been the instrument whereby the man to whom he had referred as "the chief" had lost his life, for he had given all the information and all the details necessary for the execution of the crime, and she could not forget the extraordinary warped ingenuity of mind which had arranged for one of the men whom he wanted out of the way to destroy the other.

"So we meet again, Estelle," repeated Sherwood, quietly.

"My name is Desmond," she said, shortly.

"No more and no less than Estelle," Sherwood laughed unpleasantly. "Are we to be so frigid with each other, we who were once partners? Don't forget that, Estelle, don't forget that you and I were partners—in crime. It isn't for you to ride the high horse with me. True," he laughed and shrugged his shoulders, "you may not have gone so far as I; you may not have lasted quite so long, but still the fact remains that you're not so darned innocent as you're trying to make out. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes," acknowledged the girl, dully.

"Splendid. We now have a basis for what I am about to propose. You must acknowledge that I have a grudge against you, Estelle. You fled into the night and left me in the lurch at a time when, perhaps, I might have been very thankful for your help. You fled into the night, and it was not long before you had acquainted the police with information which, had they been able to get hold of me, would have made

things extremely awkward. Might have cost me my life, in fact. I could really say that that 'might' is not strong enough; it would have cost me my life, without a doubt."

"If they'd caught you?"

"If they'd caught me, yes."

"I suppose it would," said Estelle, slowly.

"Of course it would, girl; what defence would I have had. You owe me reparation for what you did then, don't you?"

"No," said Estelle, coldly. "No, a thousand times no! You killed a man. You deserve to . . . to . . ."

"To hang for it, eh?" Sherwood laughed cynically. "Well, that depends on the point of view. You must remember that I was due to lose my freedom for many years had I not done away with the Dude. I maintain that you owe me reparation; but not only for that are you in my debt. What would have happened, my dear, if I hadn't arrived just when I did this evening? Where would you have been now . . . heaven or hell? That brute there," he jerked his head towards the still whimpering figure in the other chair, "would certainly have tortured you and just as certainly killed you when he had satisfied his lust for cruelty. So you owe me your life as well, I think. Are we agreed?"

Estelle suddenly sat up as far as her bonds would let her and looked Sherwood straight in the face.

"Ben," she said, quietly. "I do owe you

my life ; I can't deny it. But in your activities on my behalf this morning only. And you owe me something, don't forget. You owe me reparation for the fact that you brought me into all this ; for it is you who are responsible, if you go back far enough. You took me from the stage with the high promise of a wonderful chance of fame and fortune quickly. You told me of a fictitious play which wanted backing. You told me that the two thousand, if we got it, would be treated as if we had borrowed it and that it would be repaid within a month of the start of the play—and I, poor fool, believed you. You owe me reparation for that, Ben, and don't forget it."

For a moment there was silence. Sherwood apparently, was rather taken aback by the girl's spirit and possibly by her argument.

"And, Ben," suddenly said Estelle, "these ropes are hurting me."

Sherwood smiled.

"Just for a very little while, Estelle, my dear, I'm afraid you must put up with them. Only until you give me your word—for I know you are a lady of honour and that you wouldn't break your word once you had given it. Listen, Estelle ; I acknowledge that it was through me that you've been drawn into all this. But you must agree that when you left me in the lurch like that, left me to go straight to the police, to my enemies, to tell them of my deed, why, then you were not playing fair ; and that being so, Estelle, I suggest that those two things wipe

out and that we start again from the beginning. In that case you still owe me for your life, a rather bigger matter than anything I might owe you. Shall we have it that way?"

Estelle lowered her eyes.

"I suppose I must," she said.

"I'm afraid so," said Sherwood, with mock sympathy. "Still, it's better to owe me for that, you know, than not to owe me for it, don't you think? Supposing I hadn't arrived until five minutes later; why, you wouldn't have been here at all. And this is what I want in return, Estelle; nothing very much, nothing very difficult. I want you to come away with me." For a moment there was a pause: Sherwood, watching Estelle intently, went on quickly as he saw the girl stiffen. "No, no, don't you worry. I don't demand anything of you. I want you to come away with me more or less as a hostage until I am free of the country, then you may go, you may return, you may do anything you like for all I care. I shall hate to part company with you because I hate to part company with any pretty girl, but I will play fair; you may do precisely as you like, only before I release you from your bonds you must promise that you will come with me."

It was a mad idea. Estelle could not see what the man would gain by it. Why should he let her free at all? Why, if he was letting her go, should he stipulate that she must accompany him to some foreign country first? What was the reason? And then, suddenly,

the truth dawned on the girl and she wondered at her dullness. He was sparing her life, and in order to do this without endangering his own, it was obviously the only thing for him to do, to take her with him—a hostage, as he had said—until he was safely out of the country. But to consent to this would she not be spoiling all John Lynton's chances of "making good," of capturing this clever criminal who had fooled him so completely? Sherwood's voice broke in on her bewildered thoughts.

"If I release you," he said quickly, sensing that she was wavering in favour of his plan, "you will be pestered by the police again, and I know you well, Estelle; they will be able to convince you with their parsonic arguments to give me away once more. I don't want that to happen, you see, until I am well out of their clutches. I've got all I want; more money than I can hope to spend for quite a considerable time. What's more, as soon as McGrory here has gone, there'll be no one else, excepting the police, who are my enemies. So you see, Estelle, that's all I want of you, that you'll come with me and be out of harm's way until we touch the French coast. Then do as you like. You needn't think that I'll leave you stranded. I'll give you enough money to return to London to do anything you like, within reason. Which is it to be?"

There was a long pause. Estelle was thinking wildly, wondering what she was to do. If she gave this man her word she knew she would

not break it. If she did not, what would happen to her? She had seen his ruthless methods with those who had opposed him. She knew that in his heart he thought himself generous in this offer which he had made her, for he was sparing her life and giving her a chance.

"Listen," said Sherwood, suddenly. "It's nearly seven now. We mustn't delay. There's a boat train leaves Victoria at 8-20. Newhaven to Dieppe, and then you're your own mistress once more and can say what you like about me. I don't care then. There'll be no trouble about passports. I've got one that will suit you. I always carry odd ones about with me. It's very reasonable, Estelle; I don't ask much of you, do I? Think—you owe me your beauty, your unblemished beauty. You owe me your life. This isn't much to ask of you in return, is it?"

Estelle remained silent. She must make up her mind now, must tell him her decision. The truth of his argument was quite clear to her; he *was* treating her fairly, extraordinarily so, in comparison with the way in which he had dealt with those others who had annoyed him. It was very little to ask of her, that she should be his companion as far as France, after which she could return immediately and lay all her information with the police. He had not even demanded her silence after she would leave him; he had given her a free hand in everything excepting the few hours during which he would escape. But that was the whole point of the

matter—those few hours during which he would escape. By agreeing to his proposal, by going with him, she would be conniving at his escape, assisting him to evade the law, the law which to Estelle meant . . . John Lynton. Was it right to buy her life at such a price, to comply with this suggestion and by so doing help a dangerous murderer to fly from justice, help him to escape to another country where, who knows, he might possibly continue his abominable crimes ?

The girl was very white ; she was finding the decision a difficult one. For, apart from everything else, there was still about Ben Sherwood a certain attraction, a lawless gaiety and irresponsibility which had appealed to Estelle when she had first met him on the stage. Although she quite realised that he well deserved to be hung, the thought that he might meet his death through her appalled the girl. No—better leave things as they were ; agree to his proposal and help him to escape from the country. Once out of it he could, at least, do no more harm in England ; it would be impossible for him ever to return, and . . . Estelle did not fancy herself in the rôle of criminal-catcher. She looked up at last at the man who had stood there patiently waiting for her decision, and said, softly :

“ All right, Ben. I’ll do it.”

“ Word of honour ? ” insisted Sherwood gently.

“ Word of honour,” said Estelle.

Sherwood hesitated not one moment longer.

Taking from his pocket the knife which he always carried—the sight of which made the girl shiver with disgust—he cut her bonds and set her free. He then took her hands in his own and gently raising her to her feet, wiped the white marks on her wrists where the cords had cut into the flesh.

“Poor little girl,” he said to himself, “what a damn shame. Never mind. This brute won’t live to do that to any other girl.”

Estelle looked at him suddenly.

“Don’t kill him, Ben, please don’t kill him! Leave him here to be captured by the police. If he’s got to die let him die at their hands.”

For a moment Sherwood looked at her, then he laughed curtly.

“My dear,” he said. “No interference with me, please. I can’t possibly do what you ask. If I leave McGrory to fall into the hands of the police it might happen just too soon for my own safety. I’m sorry, my dear, but I can’t do it.”

All the time he was gently pushing her towards the door and she was now through it and in the passage. Sherwood released his hold on her arm.

“Stop here for a few minutes, Estelle,” he laughed quietly. “See how I trust you.”

With that he returned quickly through the door and closed it.

The man acted with a rapidity which was characteristic. Everything that was inflammable within reach he piled in front of the fire and round

McGrory's chair. Curtains, woodwork, sheets from the bed, everything that he could lay his hands on which would serve the purpose ; and as he did so he looked up into the almost dazed eyes of his victim and spoke quietly :

" You wanted to burn her, did you, McGrory ? You were going to kill her through fire ; right, old man ; you, yourself, are going to go out through your own medium. You've chosen your own exit ; don't blame me. I shouldn't have thought of it if it hadn't been for you."

He laughed mirthlessly, but all the time that he spoke he worked rapidly. At last he had finished.

He stood back facing the chair which contained his enemy.

" A few minutes ago you asked me who I was, McGrory. I'll tell you now. I'm Ben Sherwood . . . and I'm the man who got away with that money."

A few minutes later Sherwood came through the door to the waiting girl, closed it quickly and hurried her into the street. Without a backward glance they disappeared from sight.

INSPECTOR HURST glanced at his watch for about the twentieth time. He muttered angrily to himself and looked out of the window to see the dawn gradually breaking in the sky and the outlines of neighbouring houses becoming, with every minute, more distinct. He sat back in his chair and yawned. Inspector Hurst's eyes closed. Inspector Hurst's head nodded.

With a start Inspector Hurst sat upright; he looked at his watch again; he muttered still more angrily to himself. Involuntarily his eyes closed once more. Inspector Hurst's head nodded; the next moment Inspector Hurst was asleep.

How long he slept he knew not, but he woke suddenly as the door of his room opened abruptly and John Lynton entered.

"Oh," said Hurst, rather grumpily, "so you've come at last, have you? Condescended to reappear. Does it usually take you all this time to go to a neighbouring hospital and identify a patient?"

John Lynton smiled, but his smile was not as gay as usual. To Hurst he looked unutterably tired and rather dejected. The older man rose to his feet and pushed Lynton into a chair.

"What's the matter, old chap?"

"A whole lot." Lynton spoke quickly in spite of his obvious fatigue. "Gosh, I thought I was on a good thing! But . . . well, it's all gone wrong."

Hurst walked round to his desk and sat down once more.

"Let's have it from the beginning," he said quietly.

"I went to the hospital with Miss Desmond," said Lynton, "and she was not able to identify the unconscious man. God knows who he is for certain, but I have my suspicions. The night had turned so fine that we decided to walk back. On the way I was going to drop in here and let you know the result of the visit, but we hadn't gone very far when suddenly I caught sight of . . . who d'you think?"

"Look here," said Hurst. "I'm not the gentle reader. You tell your story quickly."

Lynton laughed.

"McGrory."

"Caught sight of McGrory?"

"Yes," said Lynton. "I was in two minds what to do, but the girl decided me. When I suggested that she should make her way home alone and explained that I had to get on after McGrory, she was quite agreeable, and off I popped into the night. I hadn't made up my mind what I was going to do about it then, whether to shadow him and see whether he was going to lead me anywhere, or to attract the attention of the first policeman I passed and arrest him. Somehow I had a sort of hunch that

McGrory was leading me quite unawares to some place of which I would very much like to know, so I left him alone, keeping a reasonable distance away and out of sight. I was quite right. McGrory was out on a job, but quite a different job to the sort of thing I had hoped for. I followed him, I say, to a big block of flats down Knightsbridge way. He walked in at the front door as bold as could be, and I was near enough to see that he let himself in with a key—how the devil he got it, I don't know. Anyway, I was in a quandary because he'd shut that door behind him. Either I could knock up the place and say that there was a dangerous criminal let loose in it and raise the devil of a row, or do a bit of sleuthing and possibly find out some more; who McGrory had come to visit, for instance. But if I did that I was risking losing the man altogether, for while I was searching the building, trying to gain admittance in some roundabout manner, there was quite a chance that he would clear off and get out down the street with no one the wiser. Finally, I thought that was a risk worth taking; McGrory loose in London could be searched for and caught. Incidentally, I've given instructions downstairs for that to be done."

"You lost him then?"

"Shut up," Lynton laughed. "I shouldn't have told you that bit until the end, I suppose. Yes—I lost him all right. I decided that I'd risk letting him slip through my fingers and try to find out more about this strange nocturnal

visit of his to such a swell neighbourhood. I found a side gate, locked, of course, leading to the garden of the flats, just round the corner; but well, never mind now, I circumvented it all right."

"Skeleton key?" interjected Hurst.

"Skeleton key be blowed; up one side and down the other. The strange thing about it, Hurst, was that then I was told, absolutely straight away for anybody to see, which flat McGrory was visiting. There was only one light shining from that building and it came from a ground floor window. It took me a very short time to get up to that window, using my usual silent and skilful methods."

He laughed gaily, and Hurst was glad to notice that his spirits seemed to have returned to him.

"And I had a look into that room. I got the shock of my life. There was McGrory, sitting as calm as you please in an armchair, with a vicious-looking automatic in his hand, which was pointed straight at a man whom I could only assume was the owner of the flat. He was standing against the wall with his hands above his head and looking ghastly. I very quietly got myself well within hearing. Well, I listened to the conversation and was very pleased indeed, old man, that I had risked losing McGrory, because that conversation was most enlightening. This man whom McGrory had taken so much trouble and such risks to visit, walking through the streets at night, was evidently

some sort of swell crook who had squealed on him. Possibly—the thought at once flashed through my mind—this fellow was the man who had given Vickers information with regard to McGrory's attempt on that two thousand on the Brighton train. It wasn't long before I got confirmation of this, because they talked of it. McGrory had gone with the intention of killing the man who had squealed on him, and I can't say I blame him altogether for the idea. Nasty things, squealers, anyway. So far all was in keeping with McGrory's character. I quite understood the fellow wanting to kill. He's the bullying type. The only thing that surprised me about it all was that he had the guts to go and get in with the man who had done him down. But then the other fellow, a sleek sort of man, not very prepossessing, particularly as he was livid in the face all the time from fear, began to talk about money. Suggested that possibly McGrory might put off the evil intention of his visit if a bit of cash passed hands. McGrory laughed at him, and that surprised me, because the sum of money offered was two thousand pounds. Two thousand is two thousand, after all; a hell of a lot for McGrory. He laughed at it, old man, just laughed at it. The other went up to three thousand at once and McGrory eventually began to suggest that if it went up a bit more he might think about it.

“Now there, I thought, things were a bit odd. I had no idea the wretch had so much sense of diplomacy. Eventually they came

to an agreement on five thousand, and before my eyes—if you believe it, or if you don't believe it, I don't care, it's true—before my eyes five thousand in notes passed hands. With that they disappeared. Evidently McGrory was taking his leave, quite friendly now. I was not surprised at that. I had to return the way I'd come, and ran back to the corner and who should pass me, quite pleased with himself, on the point of whistling, you know the sort of thing, but old McGrory. I followed him, having decided that the first thing I would do when I was within hail of a policeman was to grip him by the collar and take a chance. But luck there began to turn against me. For some odd reason we didn't pass a single policeman for about a mile and a half. By the time we got that far McGrory suddenly jumped into a taxi drawn up by the kerb, and was off like a shot from a gun. I thought I was done in but I had a bit of luck then. A man in a private car happened to pass at that moment and stopped at my call. Nice fellow; he had just been to a dance or something, all toggled up in evening dress, white tie, top hat, and all the rest of it. I gave him an idea of what I wanted—to keep the taxi in sight—and he wasn't slow to oblige me as soon as I made it clear who I was. Well, I think that sudden jump into the taxi must have been an idea on McGrory's part to stave off any possible follower. A sudden idea that came into his head, rather than a prearranged plan or sudden fright because he had observed me.

Anyway, he paid it off about a mile further on and I paid off my helper with a handshake. Nice fellow that. When I turned round McGrory was at the other end of the street and rounding a corner. I hadn't much idea where I was now, beyond being somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Thames. But I bolted to that corner and was just in time to realise that there was a policeman coming down from the other end of the street. McGrory was bang in between us. I got a real kick at the sight of that policeman, Hurst, old chap. I thought my luck had really turned, and so it had . . . only the wrong way."

Again Lynton laughed. He took out his pipe, filled and lit it. As soon as it was drawing to his satisfaction he resumed.

"McGrory suddenly stopped at a door when he was still some way from me, calmly took a key from his pocket, turned it in the lock, opened the door, shut it and locked it behind him. He'd gone off the face of the map, as far as we were concerned, just about as easily as he could have done. Where the devil McGrory got all these keys from I don't know, but I've got a pretty shrewd idea that he's been to that place before. I'll tell you why in a moment. He probably had a master key made originally and has used it ever since. When I got opposite the door the policeman was still a few yards away, and I was in time to notice that the place was, obviously, an old clothes shop. I stopped the officer, explained the situation to him and sent him off at once to

collect one or two others. I remained to watch that McGrory did not escape from the house ; he's pretty quick, is that fellow. The constable came back with two others in a few minutes. One I sent round to the back and as soon as I had allowed enough time for him to get there I and the other two men banged on the door. There was no reply for some time and I was on the point of breaking in the door when an old man opened it. Now I've taken the trouble before I came up here to your room to investigate that old man's story, and every word is true. It was an old clothes shop all right and it's quite in order. He'd never heard of McGrory, never seen him and he had been missing suits of clothes at odd times for the last few weeks. Directly he heard that somebody had walked in he went at once to his stock and nearly went into a fit as he'd lost yet another complete suit. I told him he was lucky it was not more—his life, for instance. McGrory's not trustworthy at the moment—he's got a gun. Anyway, I've got a description of that suit and you can bet I searched the place up and down for McGrory, but not a sign could we find. The fellow at the back said he hadn't left that way, but how he left God knows. Probably he was gone before my watcher got round. A good night's work, what ? Everything just a bit wrong, Hurst, old boy. I was a trifle too confident, that was the trouble ; I wanted to find out more than he could tell me."

"I don't call it a bad night's work at all,"

said Hurst. "What about that fellow down in Knightsbridge, the swell crook? Wouldn't be a bad idea to go and visit him, would it?"

"Oh, I thought of all that," said Lynton. "I've not investigated that fellow yet, Hurst. Only I thought I'd come up and talk to you while somebody else did a job of work for a change. Sammy's on the job. He ought to be back soon."

Even as he spoke the words, the telephone bell on Hurst's desk rang. The Inspector removed the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes. It's Hurst speaking. Oh, yes, Sammy. What? Shot through the back? Close range! Ye Gods! All right, I'll tell Lynton."

He replaced the receiver and looked up.

"Your man's been nabbed," he said. "He won't be much use to us though, old chap. Shot through the back, close range. Quite dead."

Lynton had risen to his feet in his astonishment.

"Good God!" he cried. "It can't be McGrory. He'd scarcely have had time to have gone all the way back. Well I don't know, I suppose he would have, really; look here, old man, I'm just going to slip down and encourage that comb-out for McGrory more than ever. Sammy, I suppose, will go through that swell crook's flat and see what he can find."

"Yes. He'll do that all right," said Hurst.

"Trust Sammy not to miss anything. Come back here afterwards, John."

"Righto!"

But just as John Lynton reached the door the telephone bell rang again. Hurst answered it.

"Hullo! Yes. Inspector Hurst speaking. What's that? You've got McGrory?"

At the words Lynton turned and almost ran to the desk.

"Out of a burning house, did you say? Singed his moustache off? What the devil are you talking about? Eh? You've got McGrory, yes. He's asking for somebody. Who? Inspector Lynton. Wants him badly, you say? What's he want him for? Won't say? He says it's very important? What's that? About the girl?"

Hurst looked up.

"Damn bad line," he said, "I wish these telephones were more reliable."

"Give me the beastly thing," said Lynton.

The allusion to the girl—who else could it be but Estelle—had filled his heart with fear. What could have happened to her? What possible connection could there be between the finding of McGrory in a burning house and Estelle, whom he had fondly imagined was now once more at home in bed, sleeping peacefully, after the excitements of the evening? Was it possible that she had not reached her lodgings, that on the way she had been seen by McGrory? Had this abominable scoundrel revenged himself on the girl for her desertion

from his gang? The thought struck terror to his heart. McGrory had been saved from a burning house, and in that house perhaps Estelle, the girl who John Lynton now realised was more to him than anyone else on earth, had been imprisoned by this fiend—and left to burn. These thoughts dashed through the young Inspector's brain in the seconds which it took for him to lift the receiver from his friend's hand. His face had grown drawn and white and he looked infinitely older than when he had entered the room.

"Hullo! Yes, Inspector Lynton. McGrory wants to see me? Where is he? Right. I'll be along in a jiffy."

He hung up the receiver.

"Going to use your telephone for a minute, Hurst, old chap."

He spoke as evenly as he could, but his heart was aching within him. He gave the number of his own home and had to wait a little before he could get through. Looking out of the window Lynton realised, for the first time, that it was day; already the sun was beginning to illumine the buildings, but his thoughts were so hectic that he scarcely considered the fact. After what seemed an interminable age he heard the voice of his housekeeper speaking.

"Hullo! Yes. It's Inspector Lynton. Has Miss Desmond returned? *She hasn't?* Not been seen since she went out with me? Right. Thank you."

Lynton leapt to his feet, seized his hat and was gone in a flash from the room.

"Good lord!" said Hurst, with a baffled frown, "the fellow's balmy! Why the devil does he want to see McGrory so urgently? I should have thought he'd seen him enough for one night."

Once in the street, John Lynton hailed a taxi and was driven rapidly to the police station in which McGrory was held. The moment he arrived there the Inspector in charge apprised him of the facts of McGrory's arrest. A fire alarm had been given in an adjacent street and the fire brigade had arrived on the spot very rapidly. The alarm had, fortunately, been given in plenty of time, but one part of the house—the upper part—was already enveloped in flames. The firemen had reached the very heart of the fire and it was there they discovered a man trussed up in a chair in a room already very nearly burnt out. He was alive when they got him out, not only alive but apparently quite unharmed, excepting that he was in a pitiable state of fear and terror. As soon as they could get him to speak, the policeman who had been called there suddenly recognised McGrory, only McGrory without a moustache, and he had bundled him off—seeing that he was not a hospital case—to the police station. There McGrory had asked immediately for Inspector Lynton to be sent for; had said that if there was any difficulty in persuading the Inspector to come, he was to be told that the girl was in danger.

With set lips and a white face Inspector Lynton asked to be directed immediately to the cell wherein McGrory was confined. A moment or two later he entered to find McGrory seated on the bed—but a very changed McGrory. Gone was the flowing moustache, making him appear incredibly younger. Lynton wasted no time, however, in remarking on this change, excepting to make a mental note that the policeman who had arrested McGrory deserved some commendation for having recognised him.

“Well,” he said, sharply.

McGrory laughed.

“I thought the name of the girl would fetch you.”

“You can cut that out. Where is she?”

“Now listen,” said McGrory, “I haven’t sent for you because I was anxious for the safety of the girl. Don’t care two hoots what happens to her, but I’ve sent for you because I was trussed up in that house and the house set on fire by the man you’re after, a man called Ben Sherwood.”

Lynton drew in his breath sharply. Was Estelle once more in the power of that man? If so, was there any hope for her at all? Better, far better, that McGrory should have got hold of her. With him there was still a chance of her life being spared—but with Ben Sherwood, the man whose crime she had witnessed, the man whom she had denounced to the police, what hope was there? Was it likely that a desperate man, a murderer indeed, would stop

at anything in order to ensure his safety?

Sick with horror at the thought, Lynton listened as McGrory continued immediately, giving the Inspector no time in which to consider the matter. In a few moments he told him precisely what had happened in that room, from the moment that Sherwood had arrived so unexpectedly. He did not, of course, enlighten the young man as to what he himself had intended doing to Estelle. But with that exception his account was more or less true. He told how he had overheard Sherwood make the girl promise to go with him to Victoria Station to catch the boat train, and thence to leave the country.

"Which train?" said Lynton, sharply.

"The eight-twenty, Newhaven to Dieppe."

Lynton looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past eight exactly. He turned like a flash on the other and cried quickly:

"What was he dressed in?"

"Brown suit, dark brown trilby hat drawn well over his face. He's got a small, black moustache and looks quite the dandy."

Without waiting for more the young Inspector rushed out of the room, past the astonished guard at the door of McGrory's cell, up the steps and out of the police station.

He leapt into a passing taxi almost before it had come to rest in answer to his frantic signal, and leaning out of the window yelled to the driver:

"Croydon aerodrome, as fast as you can

make it. If you break all records you'll get double your fare."

The accelerator pedal was pushed down hard : the car leapt forward.

ESTELLE stood leaning over the rail, Ben Sherwood at her side, both of them watching the ceaseless flow of passengers from the trains up the gangway on to the decks of the Channel steamer. But Estelle watched them with unseeing eyes : and although Sherwood was talking all the while she heard no word of what he said. Her mind was very fully occupied in reviewing the situation in which she found herself, and marvelling at the coolness of the man beside her. He was wanted for murder—for a crime which would mean inevitable execution were he to be apprehended—yet he was actually making light conversation to her during these moments of tension when every second meant another second towards freedom. As soon as the boat sailed, a definite step towards the successful outcome of his flight was taken ; every moment of delay would have been to her, placed in similar circumstances, nothing more nor less than an agony.

Sherwood, however, was just as debonair and gay as usual ; in fact even more so, since the rôle which at present he was acting—that of a well-dressed young man travelling for pleasure—gave him all the opportunities he wanted. Estelle could not withstand an occasional glance

at this happy companion beside her, a glance no matter how unwilling, of genuine admiration. She hated the man—hated his duplicity, his blandness, his utterly unmoral outlook, his cold and pitiless cruelty: yet she could not but envy his invariable good temper, his quiet confidence in himself, and his amazing control of his nerves. Ben Sherwood was a rogue indeed, but a damnably attractive one!

Out of the mists of her jumbled thoughts his voice reached her brain:

“Estelle, my dear, who would have thought it! A few months ago and you and I were on the stage, talented beyond all dreams but appreciated only a little beyond rotten eggs! A few weeks ago and we were . . . hush, whisper the word only . . . *gangsters*! A few days ago and we were penniless: and what of the present moment? Why, I’ve got wealth beyond my wildest hopes! Wealth which will keep me out of trouble—and without the necessity to work—for years and years and years! A wandering minstrel shall I become, but certainly not a thing of shreds and patches. I shall be beautifully dressed and I shall have a servant to carry my solid silver flute. I shall live in happiness for ever; sleeping a little, eating a little, living a little—and drinking a lot.”

He paused: out of the corner of his eye he regarded the enchanting profile of the girl beside him long and carefully: no feature would he have had altered in the smallest detail.

“And without the necessity to work.”

Estelle looked up at her companion, surprised at his words. She found his eyes fixed on her, smiling eyes, but eyes holding an expression which she did not understand. He seemed to be sending her a message, a message which somehow combined a sort of timid humility with the inevitable smiling confidence.

He held her eyes for a full second, and in spite of herself the girl was enthralled; he tossed her enrapt attention to one side, and laughed, and Estelle could have screamed with a curious blend of mortification and relief.

Abruptly he spoke again :

"And without the necessity to work. Do you see what I mean, Estelle, dear? That now I am going to go straight. How straight, you may ask with justice. Let me tell you : only slightly curved. I shall retain what I have already got, but I shall not seek to add to my hoard by further illicit inroads into dankly respectable society. I shall be like the line of some graph which has risen abruptly and then remained at Set Fair, and I should be the very personification of Set Fairest if . . . if you would stay with me?"

"Ben!"

"Yes, my darling?"

"Stay with you—a foul murderer—a—a . . . oh, words fail me! You stand there smiling that loathsome oily smile, that self-satisfied, look-at-me-isn't-it-wonderful motion of the lips, and you ask *me* to stay with you. With a promise of marriage, I suppose . . . later.

Much later. In the next world, possibly. Oh, you vile creature! So that was why you wanted me to come down with you! So that was why you were so anxious to make me understand that my presence was necessary for your safety, for your . . .”

“Turn off the cold tap,” interrupted Sherwood quietly. “No . . . that wasn’t why. Your presence with me as far as France was necessary for reasons which I have already described to you; principally because I couldn’t have left you free to go straight to the police and give me away. But I promised that as soon as I was safely planted with both feet on the fair soil of France, then you would be free to do precisely as you desired. That is a promise to which I shall keep, and quite shortly you will be free. I was speaking lightly, Estelle, a few minutes ago: lightly in form, but very, very seriously in fact. I meant what I said, Estelle; I don’t know that I love you—but I am devilishly attracted. I am ready to propose marriage, you see; after all there is always divorce.”

He paused and looked at her, but the girl did not meet his eyes. She was amazed at her own sensations—amazed at the fact that she was actually flattered by this offer of marriage from this . . . murderer. But the sensation lasted a second or two only—then to her mind came a vision of the clean-cut features of John Lynton. And as her brain visualised the young Inspector’s face, so a feeling of renewed loathing came to her for this unscrupulous adventurer beside her

which shut out any possible feeling of pity for the rejected suitor.

All the time Sherwood gazed without cessation at the girl, striving to understand from her expression what was passing in her mind. Suddenly he spoke :

“ All right, Estelle. Don't worry your pretty head any more ; you'll be rid of me quite shortly. More's the pity, from my point of view. More's the pleasure, from yours. It's a shame : I love you very much—at the moment. Don't say I'm not candid, Estelle ; don't say, whatever may become of you, that Ben Sherwood wasn't straight as straight, at least with you. I really . . . *God !* ”

The exclamation was so sudden, was so unexpected, that Estelle involuntarily jumped. She glanced sharply towards him, looked at his suddenly pallid face, followed the direction of his startled and abruptly crafty eyes. Sherwood, from having so recently been the lover pleading his cause, now in one second had changed to the hunted criminal scenting danger.

Estelle followed the direction of his startled eyes—and saw John Lynton running up the gangway, which had been left in position one minute longer before the departure of the boat in order to enable him to board her.

She looked round again—and she found that she was alone. Ben Sherwood had disappeared as completely, and as suddenly, as any debtor in unexpected sight of a creditor.

For a few seconds Estelle hesitated : she

had given her word to Ben Sherwood—she had promised, even if against her will, to help him until he reached France. But—the sight of the young man, so fresh, so honest, so *clean*—had affected her even more than she had thought possible.

“ Oh . . . God in heaven, save me from Sherwood—but save my honour from John ! ”

It was a prayer more than a cry ; a passionate appeal to heaven that in this crisis she should betray neither her trust—nor her lover.

They were casting off—ropes dropped with a splash into the sea, ropes which had held the good ship to the quay. The gangways had long since been pulled from the ship : the journey across the Channel had already started. The engines thrilled the ship—the propellers churned the sea.

And then John Lynton saw her.

In a few strides he was by her side ; he stood there ; almost unbeknown to them, their hands had met, hers held in a grip of steel. But although he was crushing her fingers, although the pain was intense, Estelle said no word. And yet John Lynton understood, for no words were needed to explain anything to him.

He drew her to him ; she felt his strong arms around her, she felt her body crushed to his. Willingly, she gave her lips.

Abruptly, Lynton almost threw her from him.

“ Estelle—I’m sorry ! ”

“ Why ? ”

Her question came almost in a whisper.

"Why?" He laughed. "Estelle, dear, because . . . because I had no right to!"

She laughed—and her laugh was music in his ears.

"You had no right to! Oh, my dear . . . and wouldn't I have prevented you if . . . if . . . I had wanted to?"

John Lynton stood quite still for a long minute. Then he shook himself—much as a great dog might shake itself.

"Estelle, my darling, you *are* mine—aren't you?"

The girl smiled.

"John, my dear, dear fool, of course I am. No!"

Gently she pushed him from her:

"John, why have you come aboard?"

John Lynton pulled himself together with an effort.

"Because of Sherwood. But I was so relieved. Estelle, so relieved to find you safe, that I forgot."

He looked around him—saw the amazed faces of the passengers about them, saw the smirk on the faces of one or two, coloured:

"Come."

He took her hand, led her quickly away from the throng, took her to the ship's office.

They were already out to sea; they had cleared the harbours. In a very few words Lynton explained his position to the officer and was taken to the captain. It was not long

before a search of the ship was being made.

But without result. Ben Sherwood, as was his habit in such circumstances, had disappeared into the blue.

The half of the journey was accomplished, and still no sign of Sherwood. John Lynton began to get nervous: such a lot depended on this capture, this arrest. He had done all that he could—Superintendent Tudor was probably already satisfied—but the arrest would make his approval certain. Yet, in all the anxiety, Lynton suddenly found that this chase, which had meant everything to him, was now quite a secondary matter; he was happy, far happier than he had ever been: Estelle had herself said that she was his.

Three-quarters of the journey was over: still there was no sign of Sherwood. The sea—unlike the ship—was as calm as it could be.

And then—round the corner of the saloon—the two men came face to face.

Sherwood had discarded his small black moustache—a mistake, for Estelle had not given him away. Recognition was mutual and instantaneous. Sherwood had time to glance round; to see the rail of the deck and the sea beyond on the one hand, and the strong walls of the cabins on the other. He chose the sea: and at that same moment he realised that Estelle, just beside Lynton, was in the way.

Sherwood tried to stop himself—but he was too late. He had already started, and the girl could not avoid his rush. For a sickening

moment they staggered against the rail: then the girl overbalanced over the side and fell.

Her cry galvanised the two men mortal foes though they might be, into instant and similar action: John Lynton never hesitated but leapt over the rail; he was only a second or two before Ben Sherwood, who had picked himself up from the deck.

The first shock of the cold sea water, as it closed over his head, cleared John Lynton's fevered brain. As he came to the surface, as he shook the smarting water from his eyes, he heard from above him as if from a great distance a cry from the decks of the vessel, a cry telling what had happened. Engines were reversed, propellers churned the ocean into a mass of small foam-flecked waves, the ship staggered and shivered as it lost speed and came to an abrupt standstill; but Lynton neither heard nor saw any of these things. His attention was entirely concentrated on a dark head bobbing astern. Something of exhilaration came to Lynton in that moment, something of heartfelt thanks to Providence that this opportunity had been offered to him. A man dreams of himself as a hero in the eyes of the girl he loves—here was the chance to make of a dream a reality.

For John Lynton was rather more than an expert swimmer. But at that moment he was only second best of those in the sea.

A head had broken the water near him, a head which scarcely paused to draw breath before the face was again under water and the

body in full action. Ben Sherwood had stolen a start towards the principal part in the rescue of Estelle.

A feeling of anger came to Lynton: anger that someone should cheat him of his triumph, annoyance that his prowess should be challenged. And at that moment a wave concealed the head of the girl he loved.

Panic.

John Lynton's arms worked like fury let loose, but always in concerted motion with his legs. He went through the water like a knife.

But Sherwood had got a good start: and Sherwood was going about as fast as any racing swimmer at that moment.

Lynton was still three yards behind: Lynton could make no impression on that three yards' start.

Sherwood reached the girl.

A boat had been manned, had been lowered from the side of the steamer. Willing volunteers handled the oars, the bows cut through the water. Estelle, very little the worse, Sherwood and Lynton, both exhausted, were drawn to safety.

In a cabin, after the safety of the girl was assured, Lynton and Sherwood faced each other. The criminal spoke first:

"I'm fond of her too; but I should think only temporarily. Anyway, she loves you, Lynton. This can make no difference: you want me, you've got me. Good enough: I couldn't have got away, anyhow. Except to death, and there's no saying what a clever counsel may do. But

listen—there's no need for both of us to get pneumonia—what about leaving me in charge of a burly steward whilst we both change ? ”

John Lynton looked at him :

“ As you have said, this can make no difference, Sherwood. I must arrest you—but now—very unwillingly.”

Ben Sherwood grinned.

“ Go to . . . heaven,” he laughed. “ Get me some dry clothes, like a good chap.”

Lynton turned : one of the ship's officers was standing by the door of the cabin, two large stewards just behind him. It was very soon arranged that John Lynton should change from his drenched clothes in the next cabin to that occupied by Sherwood. One of the stewards was to mount guard over the prisoner within the cabin : the other on the outside of the door.

Estelle, Lynton was assured, was being well looked after.

The good ship got under way once more. They were very nearly at the end of their journey by the time that Lynton, in a suit of clothes provided by the first officer, stepped from the cabin feeling once more himself. His mind was just a trifle bewildered : events had happened with such incredible rapidity. But two things remained uppermost, two intensely satisfying thoughts refused to be dislodged from the forefront of his mind : Estelle loved him—and Ben Sherwood was, at long last, laid by the heels.

John Lynton cast one glance towards the

door of the cabin in which his prisoner was changing, and saw the steward who was on guard outside. He smiled to himself.

Then he hastened off to find Estelle.

Ten minutes later, just as the ship was sidling towards the quay and the gangways were about to be placed in position, Lynton returned to the cabin which harboured Sherwood. He was surprised to notice no steward outside the door.

John Lynton's heart missed a beat: he ran the last few yards: he threw open the door.

Two stewards, neatly bound by the cords and gagged by the curtains themselves, stared at him in forcedly mute appeal. One was missing a steward's uniform.

Lynton did not ask what had happened; he turned like a flash and gave the alarm.

But the gangways were already down. A steward can get off a boat very quickly—and so can a man in steward's uniform.

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Estelle broke a long happy silence.

"I think I'm glad he got away, John," she said softly. "He is a brute, of course . . . but sometimes an awfully attractive and clever brute, all the same."

John Lynton nodded.

"He is certainly a man of many talents," he said slowly, "but he's carrion—a grim vulture preying on his own kind. Some day, Estelle, I'll get him, just as . . ." he stopped.

Estelle looked at him and smiled.

“Just as surely as you’ve got me?”

“Just as surely,” said John Lynton, gently increasing the pressure of his arm; “just as surely, Estelle, as I’ve got you.”

THE END

